

# The position of common languages in Afghanistan in the last two centuries

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**Abstract:** Afghanistan has been called as the “crossroads of ancient cultures” due to its geostrategic and geopolitical sensitive location. Afghanistan has hosted dozens of civilizations throughout history. Various ethnic groups live in Afghanistan, such as Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmens, Baloches, Imaqs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyzes, Peshaiis, Nuristani, Pamiri, etc. These ethnic groups have been living together for a long time. The official languages of Afghanistan are Persian (officially called Dari) and Pashto. Next to Pashto and Persian, the most widely spoken languages in Afghanistan are Turkish languages (Uzbek, Turkmen, Kyrgyz and Kazakh), which are widely used in northern Afghanistan. In addition to these languages, there are other languages spoken by other ethnic minorities in this country. Unfortunately, in the last two centuries, the common languages in this land have experienced many ups and downs. In order to protect the different languages of this country, the constitution of Afghanistan was amended again in 2004, and despite these efforts, language remains a controversial issue in Afghanistan that often forces the ethnic groups living in this land into confrontation with each other.

**Keywords:** Afghanistan, language politics, supremacy and linguistic struggle

## INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan is ethnically a heterogeneous and multi-national nation. The language policy in Afghanistan has changed during the 20th century due to the socio-political conditions and efforts to promote the political goals of the regimes in power. Their main goals have been to strengthen national unity, national identity, ethnic motivations and political ideas, and in this way, the turbulent history of Afghanistan in the 20th century has been accompanied by frequent changes in the language policy of Afghanistan.

In terms of geographical location, Afghanistan is considered a key country in the region; it connects the countries of Central Asia, South Asia and the Middle East. The name of this country was called Khorasan in the middle Ages and it was known as

Ariana in ancient times (Dorson, 1999, p. 49). The government of this country was formed by the political development of the Pashtun tribes in the middle of the 18th century and did not reach unity until the end of the 19th century (Sarat, 2011, p. 289). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the reign of Amir Abdul Rahman Khan, this country officially named Afghanistan and in the latest constitution that was approved on third January, 2004, it was changed to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. However, after changing the name of this country from Khorasan to Afghanistan and on the other side leading the linguistic and ethnocentric issues in this regard, consistently brought the various ethnic groups residing in this country into confrontation and has become a highly significant and challenging issue (Sotoda, 2018, p. 2). Non-Pashtun peoples, especially Persian speakers and Turkish speakers, consider the naming of this country as Afghanistan as an imposed and political issue and claim that this name is derived from the name of Afghan tribe (Pashtuns), which the Pashtun rulers and the British in the 19th century have been forcedly imposed on other ethnic groups based on social-political issues. In Afghanistan, for the first time, the topic of "nation and superior language" at the end of the 19th century was raised by Mahmoud Tarzi (died 1933). Although all his works are in Persian, Mahmoud Tarzi claimed that Pashto language is the superior language of Afghanistan and tried to introduce Pashto language into the press of Afghanistan along with Persian, which was the only official and literary language of the government at that time. . Although Mahmoud Tarzi proposed the formalization of Pashto language instead of Persian language, but in terms of culture, literature, writing and social prevalence of Persian language, he knew well that Pashto language can never take the place of Persian language (Yasna, 2019, p. 22).

During the period of Ahmad Shah Abdali, all government correspondence and conversations were in Dari (Persian) language (Fazaaieli, 2004, p. 71). Until the era of Nader Khan (1929) Persian i.e. Dari was the only official language of the government and the national language of the people of Khorasan (Afghanistan). Despite the fact that in the last two centuries, the absolute majority of Afghanistan kings were from the Pashtun people, but they were proud of being Khorasani and their official language which was Persian. Later, during the reign of Amanullah Khan and Mohammad Nader Khan, along with Mahmoud Tarzi, some others also encouraged ethnic and linguistic superiority and tried to replace Pashto instead of Persian as the official language of the government.

With the passage of time, the language issue in Afghanistan has become a sensitive subject and has been dealt with dual treatment by the authorities and officials with different languages in Afghanistan. The issue of language and ethnicity superiority has now become one of the cracks and obstacle to nation-building in Afghanistan due to interaction and reaction. Unfortunately, other common languages

in Afghanistan such as Uzbek, Turkmen, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Pashaii, Nuristani, and Pamiri languages etc., have not received much attention by the officials and heads of government in these two centuries.

### Linguistic Diversity in Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a country with linguistic diversity, although the number of speakers of certain languages in this country has decreased over time, but the people of this region still speak dozens of languages. Linguistic diversity in Afghanistan has many reasons that can point out the specific geopolitical location of this country.

There are differences of opinion among researchers and linguists about the number of common languages in Afghanistan. Some people consider the living languages of this country to be 20 languages, but some have said more than 40 languages. Dr. Mujawer Ahmed Ziyar has divided the common languages in Afghanistan into four groups. The first group is an Aryaii group that includes Pashto, Farsi, Balochi, Kurdish and twelve-thirteen Pamiri languages. The second group is the group of Turkish languages, which includes Uzbek, Turkmen, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Afshari, Azari, etc. The third group is Indian and Aryaii groups, which includes Gujarati, Sindhi, Peshaii, Nuristani, Punjabi and Brahui languages, and the fourth group are Semitic language groups, which includes Arabic and Hebrew, and currently Hebrew language does not exist in Afghanistan, because its speakers have left Afghanistan. In this discussion, only the history of the languages that have the most speakers among the people of Afghanistan will be examined.

1-Pashto: Pashto, which some call the Afghani language, is one of the southeastern groups and among the Iranian branch of the Indo-European languages, which is spoken by the Pashtuns of Afghanistan and the Pashtuns of the northwest and west of Pakistan (Senzil Naveed, 2013, p. 3). They make up 40% of the population of Afghanistan, which is considered the most populous tribe in Afghanistan. Their number is estimated between 12-15 million people (Timziork, 2016, p. 159). Pashto has two main southern and eastern dialects. Although Pashto literature has existed since the 7th century, the Pashto language did not have any prominence until the 18th century. Durrani tribe is the largest and most important tribe of Pashtuns, and their native land is the western and southwestern regions of Kandahar. The second largest tribe of Pashtuns is Ghalzi who live in the areas between Ghazni and Kandahar. Other Pashtun tribes include the border tribes of Waziris, Khataks, Mohmands, Shinwaris, Yousafzais and Afridis, who are known as the guardians of Khyber Kotel (Senzil Naweed, 2013, p. 3).

2-Farsi language: Dari is the name of the Persian language popular in Afghanistan, whose various dialects are spoken natively in the north and west and scattered in other regions of Afghanistan by Tajiks, who make up more than a third of Afghanistan's

population. Although speakers of Persian language are scattered in different regions of Afghanistan, different dialects of Persian language are mostly spoken in cities such as Badakhshan, Kabul, Herat, Ghazni, Hazara Jat, Parwan, Kapisa, Balkh, Panjshir, Samangan and Takhar. Persian is accepted as the second official language in Afghanistan (Timzyork, 2016, p. 159). Persian language is considered as the international language among the people of Afghanistan. Persian language has been the literary and administrative language since the Samanians and Ghaznavians period in the 9th and 10th centuries. With the creation of the contemporary government of Afghanistan by Ahmad Shah Durrani in 1747 the Persian language kept its position as an administrative and literary language, and other languages, including Pashto, were considered local and ethnic languages which had local use (Ghubar, 1987, p. 354). Although the Abdalis were Pashtuns, they made the Persian language the official language of the government, and they not only spoke in this language, but also sang poetry, for example, Ahmad Shah Abdali and his son Timur Shah and his grandson Shah Shoja and... They have written poetry in Persian language.

During the period of Ahmad Shah Abdali, all government correspondence and conversations were in Dari (Persian) language (Fazali, 2004, p. 71). Until the era of Nader Shah (1929) Persian was the only official language of the government and the national language of the people of Khorasan (Afghanistan), as a result of which Pashtuns, Turks and other small groups learn the Persian language and use it in daily conversations, and it acts as a bridge of communication between the languages of other ethnic groups.

- Uzbek language: Uzbeks are the most populous Turkish tribes in Afghanistan with a population of nearly three million people. Uzbeks, like other Turkish tribes, live in the northern areas of Afghanistan, i.e. South Turkestan. The Uzbek language in Afghanistan became especially prevalent with the support and tact of Amir Ali Shir Navaii, the most prominent or in other words the most influential Uzbek-Turkish poet and writer. Amir Ali Shir Navaii although had a special interest in Persian and Arabic languages, but in order to spread the Uzbek language he tried a lot (Tuxton et al., 2004, p. 40).

Similarly, by creating works in the Uzbek-Turkish language, Zahieruddin Mohammad Babur not only takes a worthy participation in its progress and development, but also performs unforgettable services for the culture of Turkish speakers. Babur's scientific, literary and cultural heritage has not lost its scientific and historical importance and beauty even today, but his book is one of the precious works of world culture (N.M. Meleh Yeef, 2000, p. 807). The Uzbek language is one of the important and living languages of the region and the world, which has an ancient history. This language includes the large family of Turkish languages, which has its

roots in the languages of the Altai group, the word Uzbek is a newly emerging term, and today it is used instead of the term (Turkish) in Uzbekistan and Afghanistan (Kohken, 2018, p. 6).

- Turkmen language: After the Uzbeks, the Turkmens are the most populous Turkish tribes in Afghanistan, who live in the northern regions of Afghanistan and some in the west of Afghanistan and in Herat province. Turkmens are also mostly engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry, but they are very famous in the carpet weaving industry and carpet trade in Afghanistan, and Afghanistan Turkmen carpets are world famous.

- Kazakh: The population of Kazakhs living in the cities of Badakhshan, Takhar, Kunduz, Baghlan, Samangan, Balkh, Gozganan, Saripol and Faryab is estimated to be around 100 thousand people. They speak Kazakh language close to Uzbek Turkish. As a result of Kazakhstan's policy to increase the population, many Kazakhs left Afghanistan and immigrated to Kazakhstan and obtained Kazakh citizenship (Timzyork, 2016, p. 160).

- Balochi language: This language is one of the oldest Aryan languages spoken by the Baloch people of southern and southwestern Afghanistan.

- Peshawari language: Peshawari language belongs to the group of Indian languages and is spoken in the central, eastern and southeastern parts of the Afghanistan. Dr. Mujaver Ahmad speaks of twenty separate dialects of Peshawari language, but the exact number of its speakers is still unknown.

- Pamir languages: Pamir languages are branch of Aryan languages, which includes seven independent languages: Shoghnani, Vakhani, Sarghulami, Zibaki, Sanglichi and Ashkashmi.

Nuristani language: Nuristani is one of the Indo-Aryan languages spoken in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The number of speakers of this language is estimated at around thirty thousand people. Nuristani language has a history of five thousand years. This language has existed since the time of Western Greece and there has been speaking with this language (Encyclopedia Britannica, 201, Sarvajah).

The acclivity and declivity of the common languages of Afghanistan in the last two centuries

As mentioned above, the country of Afghanistan has many ethnic, racial, linguistic and religious minorities, which has caused a lot of disunity, tension and conflicts among the residents of this land and has put the national unity of Afghanistan in serious danger (John Prover, 2010, p. 36). In the last hundred years, Pashto language has been considered more than other common languages of Afghanistan, mainly for two reasons, firstly because of the large number of speakers and on the other hand because of the political power of Pashtuns, but from the point of view of validity is in

the second place compared to Persian language. In the last century, many efforts were made to promote and develop the Pashto language. However, the issue of the superior language and the value of giving preference to one language over other common languages of Afghanistan was discussed during the reign of Amir Habibullah (1919-1901). Mahmoud Tarzi is a famous Afghan essay writer that worked in the governmental system publishes articles about the importance of Pashto language in Siraj Al-Akhbar one of the governmental newspaper. In one of his articles, he claims that the Pashto language is the ancestor of all (Indo-Iranian) languages. The announcement of new regulations related to the freedom of the press during the reign of Shah Amanullah in (1919-1929) caused the rapid growth of literary activities, and several publications in Kandahar and the eastern and southern provinces started with Pashto articles. In 1927, a group of Pashtun intellectuals from Kandahar created an association under the name of "Pashto Mareka" with the support and encouragement of the government, whose main purpose is to promote the Pashto language and literature. Based on the guidance of the Loya Jirga of 1924, the text of the constitution and all governmental regulations are translated into Pashto, but the constitution does not designate any of the languages as the national language or the official language of Afghanistan. Some people are trying to throw away the Persian language from the administrative system, and not much attention is paid to the language of ethnic minorities, only in this period, in the five-afghani and fifty-afghani banknotes, the digits "Bish" means five) and "Alli" means fifty) means it is printed in Uzbek language (Barzegar, 2019, p. 4).

During the reign of Zaher Shah, representatives of Uzbeks and Turkmens of Afghanistan in the 13th term of the National Council tried to open a door for the broadcasting of Turkish languages (Uzbek and Turkmen) on Afghanistan Radio. In 1971, broadcasts in Uzbek and Turkmen languages began for the first time on Radio Afghanistan. And these publications continued until the middle of 1973. After the military coup of 1975, when Mohammad Dawood took over the government affairs, for unknown reasons, the broadcasts of Radio Afghanistan in these two languages were stopped and it was not revived until the fall of Mohammad Dawood's government.

Status of Common Languages of Afghanistan during the Communist Regime: After the fall of Dawood Khan's regime, the communist system was established in Afghanistan in 1978. The communist system, which was founded on the principles of the school of communism, sought to achieve Marxist goals rather than relying on race and language. Article 28 of the Constitution of the "Democratic Republic of Afghanistan" states: "All citizens of Afghanistan are equal against the law. All the people of Afghanistan, regardless of race, nationality, tribe, language, gender, place of residence, religion, education, lineage, have equal social status, rights and

responsibilities.” For this reason, the issue of language was not discussed more in this period and Persian and Pashto languages were the official languages of the government and the people tried to develop these two languages and other common languages including Turkish, and the government did not interfere in this field.

After 1978 coup, that the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan, the advocators of Soviet (Russia), came to power, Radio Afghanistan broadcasts in Uzbek and Turkmen languages began again, and these broadcasts, which were 30 minutes a day for each language, continued until the Taliban came to Kabul. And during the period of Emarat rule, publications in Uzbek and Turkmen languages were stopped again. After the fall of the Emarat regime, broadcasts in Uzbek language on Afghanistan Radio were revived again, and on national television, the opportunity for broadcasts in Uzbek language was provided for 30 minutes every day. In the middle of 1987, the first government publication named “Yoldoz” (star) in Uzbek and Turkmen languages was published in Kabul. After a few months, another magazine called "Gonesh" (sun) started publishing in Turkmen language, and "Yoldoz" was published in Uzbek language in Kabul for about ten years. In the recent years of Dr. Najibullah’s rule, this magazine was moved to Mazar-e-Sharif and became the publication organ of the Ministry of Borders and Tribal Affairs. After the fall of Dr. Najibullah’s rule, Yoldoz publications supported by the "National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan" party were published in Mazar-e-Sharif in the form of a magazine with a small section using the limited facilities of the local printing press, which was stopped when the northern provinces were fall by the Emarat.

During the years of rule of the ‘People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan’, the ground was provided for publishing books and works of Uzbek writers. The collection of poems of Uzbek poets was published by the Union of Writers. "Khamsa" by Amir Ali Shir Nawaii, the book of Zahieruddin Muhammad Babar’s poems, the poems of Khanum Nadera and other books were published in Kabul.

After the fall of Dr. Najibullah’s rule, the forces of the National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan were given the control of Northern provinces for several years. In these years, Andisha, Yaghdo, Toghriyul, Bidar, and "Neda-e-Islam" magazines were published in Mazar-e-Sharif, and "Jozjanan" in Sheberghan, and "Faryab" and "Qoyash" in Maimana, and some of these magazines were in Uzbek language.

For the first time, education in Uzbek language started in Afghanistan schools after the revolution of 1987. The Ministry of Education created the Department of Uzbek in Compilation and Translation Directorate and appointed a number of Uzbek professors to write textbooks in Uzbek language. Up to the fourth grade, all lesson topics were written and printed under the supervision and advice of Dr. Aref Osman

Ouf, the Uzbekistani consultant of the Ministry of Education, and teaching in Uzbek language began in the schools of Uzbek-populated areas.

This program did not have a good result. The Ministry of Education did not publish Uzbek language and literature textbooks for middle and high school classes. Students who were taught in Uzbek until the fourth grade, had to study in Persian in the fifth grade. This problem caused the Uzbeks to no longer show much desire to learn in their mother tongue. This program was a good start, but it had a disappointing ending. Teaching in the mother tongue for Afghanistan Uzbek children was no longer continued.

The Department of Uzbek was opened for the first time in 1983 at the Faculty of Language and Literature of Kabul University. This department continued its activity until the end of Dr. Najibullah's rule (1992). With the beginning of the civil wars, the door of the Uzbek department in Kabul University was closed and it was not active for nearly three decades. In the Department of Uzbek Language and Literature of Kabul University, in addition to the local professors, several professors specializing in Uzbek language and literature from the Soviet Republic of Uzbekistan were teaching at the time.

Dozens of students, most of whom were sons of Uzbeks, graduated from this department, and now some of them were teaching Uzbek language in universities and teacher training institutes in the northern provinces of the country and are still teaching in universities in northern Afghanistan.

Mujahideen government: During the government of Mr. Burhanuddin Rabbani (1992-1996), which was the second government in the history of contemporary Afghanistan that was in the hands of Persian speakers. Due to internal wars over the distribution of political power, this government could not bring all the territorial areas of Afghanistan under its control and form an "all-inclusive" central government. For this reason, the opportunity to create a platform for the growth of Persian language and literature and other languages did not arise in this period.

The status of languages during the twenty-year presence of Americans in Afghanistan: During the two periods of the republic regime of Afghanistan, President Hamid Karzai and President Ashraf Ghani, in addition to Pashto, Farsi and other languages had a relatively good situation. In these two periods, which began in 2001 and continue until early 2021, the Persian language maintains its formality in the constitution. Although the freedom of the press and media provides the basis for cultural and media pluralism in the society.

In the Loya Jirga of the Constitution of Afghanistan, which was held on 14<sup>th</sup> December of 2003 (23<sup>rd</sup> Qaws of 1382 SH) with the participation of 503 representatives of the Afghanistan people, one of the controversial issues was the approval of the



Turkish languages (Uzbek and Turkmen), Pashaii, Nuristani, Balochi and Pamiri as official languages in the country. As a result of the resolute stand of the representatives of the speakers of these languages and the support of the majority of the members of the Loya Jirga, the second paragraph of the sixteenth article of the Afghanistan Constitution was approved as follows:

"In areas where the majority of people speak one of the Uzbek, Turkmen, Peshaii, Nuristani, Balochi, or Pamiri languages, that language, in addition to Pashto and Dari, is the official third language, and the manner of its application is regulated by law" ([www.bbc.com/Persian/afghanistan](http://www.bbc.com/Persian/afghanistan)).

After the fall of the Emarat regime and the formation of a new government in Afghanistan, the Ministry of Education of Afghanistan introduced the Uzbek language teaching system in the schools of the Uzbek-populated areas. The Ministry of Education published Uzbek language textbooks up to the sixth grade.

The lack of formation for Uzbek language teachers in schools, the non-inclusion of graduates of the Uzbek language and literature departments of universities and teacher training institutions in teacher recruitment exams, and the non-inclusion of Uzbek language lessons in the education curriculum were among other problems that the Ministry of Education did not solve (Ebrahim, 2013, p. 2).

The presidents of Afghanistan were somewhat interested in Persian during the twenty years of American presence. Hamed Karzai, the former president of the country (2001-2014) also sometimes held poetry gatherings in the citadel (Arg) where Persian and Pashto poets recited poetry. He speaks eloquently in national languages, especially Dari Persian. Former President Dr. Mohammad Ashraf Ghani (2021-2014) also spoke Persian like his mother tongue. Among the works he wrote in Farsi, we can mention the book "Rawzana-e- ba Nezam-e-Adel (an opening to a just system)". During the Republic period, the Ministry of Information and Culture published publications in Uzbek language in the framework of "Watandaran" publications in recent years after the first period of the Emarat, and for whatever reason, the Uzbek section of the Watandaran publication did not reach the literate and educated Uzbek community. Also, during this period, the national radio and television of Afghanistan broadcast several hours a week in Uzbek, Turkmen, Peshaii, Balochi and Nuristani languages.

Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, the President of the Republic of Afghanistan, in recent years of his presidency, has repeatedly mentioned the rich and important history of the Uzbek language in the region. He took effective steps to improve the status of Uzbek language in Afghanistan. The beginning of publications of the presidential palace and some government offices in Uzbek language and the approval of the "National Uzbek Language Day" in Afghanistan can be considered as symbolic steps to improve the position of the Uzbek language in that period. In the fall of the year (2019), October

20 was recognized as the national day of the Uzbek language in Afghanistan, and the cabinet approved it in a meeting, and thus this day was included in the official calendar of this country.

In 2019, the Presidential Palace of Afghanistan held a commemoration ceremony for the first time to celebrate this day (Kohkan, 2018, p. 5).

## CONCLUSION

In Afghanistan, the language issue has always been a source of conflict and disagreement between the ethnic groups living in this country for the past two centuries, and the main and fundamental reason for this is the issue of superiority and language conflict. From the 10th century to the 19th century, the Persian language was the only written and official language in this country, and there was no difference in this regard according to historical evidence among other ethnic groups in this country, but in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the issue of the superior language and language conflict is fueled and ethnic differences arise little by little over the issue of language. For the first time, during the rule of Habibullah Khan and Amanullah Khan, an attempt was made to make Pashto a substitute for Persian and be accepted as the superior language in Afghanistan, but there was not much result, and again between 1940-1950, the government tried to make Pashto people-liked language and raise its status as an official language, and the Ministry of Information and Culture is obliged to promote the Pashto language through the media. But on the contrary, no effective action is taken in the field of growth and prosperity of Persian language, Turkish, Peshaii, Nuristani and other languages.

In the last hundred years, some people have always tried that Pashto language should be declared as the only national and official language of Afghanistan, because they believed that the Afghan government is run by Pashtuns and Pashtuns are the ethnic majority in Afghanistan. While the Persian language has been the literary and administrative language of Afghanistan since its creation in the 10th century, and the absolute majority of Afghan people know Persian. The name of Afghanistan's currency, which today is "Afghani", was once the Kabuli rupee, which was first made available to the people in the 20th century during the reign of Amanullah Khan, and its description was written in Persian, in the corner of this paper money, its amount was exist in four languages: Persian, Pashto, Urdu and Uzbek. But later, with the creation of Da Afghanistan Bank, the Kabuli rupee was replaced with Afghani and the language used in the currency was also changed to Pashto. All these show the linguistic superiority and the conflict with other languages. In the last two decades, apart from the Pashto language, which has always been the focus of the rulers and high-ranking government officials, no effective efforts have been made in the field of the growth of other languages, and based on this lack of attention, today some of the native languages

that live in remote areas of Afghanistan has a more limited use, they face a different situation than Pashto and Persian languages. So far, the little work that has been done about indigenous languages is not enough to effectively prevent the gradual destruction of these languages. Today, the language issue in Afghanistan has become a sensitive issue between the Afghanistan ethnic groups, and instead of a link and empathy, it is considered a dagger of the season and deep cracks between the different nationalities of the country. Compared to other common languages, Pashto and Persian languages are among the most prominent cases of controversy between ethnic groups, and sometimes opportunistic individuals and groups abuse as instrumental and political from the language issue.

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