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Survey of the Afghan people: some statistics about religion and politics

HRWF (18.11.2015) - The Asian Foundation has published "Afghanistan in 2015: A Survey of the Afghan People" (<http://bit.ly/1HZjmP1>) in which a short section is devoted to Politics and Religion:

Q-31. Some people say that politics and religion should be mixed. Other people say politics and religion should not mix. For example, some say religious scholars should only manage religion, and should not take part in politics. Which is closer to your view?

Most Afghans (61.3%) say that religious scholars should be involved in politics. Pashtuns (65.0%) and Tajiks (61.7%) are more likely to agree that religious leaders should be involved in political decisions, compared to 56.0% of Uzbeks and 52.6% of Hazaras. Accordingly, the regions with the highest percentage of residents who believe religious leaders should take part in political decisions are the regions with the highest concentrations of Pashtun and Tajik residents: the South West (73.2%) and East (73.3%) regions. Meanwhile, the regions with the lowest percentage of residents who say the same are the Central/Hazarajat (48.8%), North West (56.1%), and West (56.8%) regions. In all regions, the percentage of residents who support mixing religion and politics declined in 2015 compared to how Afghans answered the same question in 2014 (64.9%). However, responses to this question have varied considerably over the past 10 years.

There are slight differences in opinion between residents of urban (58.1%) and rural (62.3%) regions who support religious leaders' involvement in politics, and also between men (63.6%) and women (59.3%). Afghans who studied at the university level are less likely (55.9%) to support the involvement of religious leaders in politics compared to Afghans who did not attend school (61.7%). Residents of insecure areas who were polled using intercept interviews are significantly more supportive of the involvement of religious leaders in politics (73.3%).

Four men sentenced to death for the murder of Farkhunda, a woman accused of blasphemy

Asia News (06.05.2015) <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Kabul:-four-men-sentenced-to-death-for-the-murder-of-Farkhunda,-a-woman-accused-of-blasphemy-34172.html> - This morning, four men were sentenced to death for killing Farkhunda, a 28-year-old woman who was falsely accused of burning a copy of the Qur'an near the Shah-e-Do Shamshera mosque in Kabul.

The incident occurred on 19 March when an angry mob beat the young woman to death, burnt her body and then tipped it into the Kabul River.

Very soon, police investigators noted contradictions in witness statements with some dismissing the charges against the victim. Eventually, they determined that a mullah at a nearby mosque had incited the crowd against her.

Farkhunda's parents told the media that their daughter went to see him to ask him to stop deceiving people by selling phoney *Tawiz* (a locket with Qur'anic verses worn by people for protection), a practice that enabled him to get rich.

In the days that followed the brutal murder, scores of people took to the streets of Kabul demanding an immediate trial for the culprits, including several police officers who did nothing to stop the violence.

At the trial, some of the defendants admitted they were driven by what they heard at the mosque.

In addition to the four men sentenced to death, eight others got 16 years in prison. An additional 18 were found not guilty.

Next week, the court will also deliberate on the fate of 19 police officers present at the time of the lynching. They are accused of dereliction of duty for failing to protect the young woman.

Afghan woman Farkhunda lynched in Kabul 'for speaking out'

BBC News (23.03.2015) <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-32014077> - An Afghan woman who was lynched after being falsely accused of burning the Koran was killed for tackling superstitious practices, witnesses say.

Farkhunda, who was beaten to death by a Kabul mob last week, had been arguing with a mullah about his practice of selling charms to women at a shrine.

In the course of the argument she was accused of burning the Koran and a crowd overheard and beat her to death.

Hundreds of Afghans protested on Monday against the attack.

Farkhunda, 28, was beaten, hit by bats, stamped on, driven over, and her body dragged by a car before being set on fire.

A policeman who witnessed the incident on Thursday told AP news agency that Farkhunda was arguing with a local mullah. Her father said she had complained about women being encouraged to waste money on the amulets peddled by the mullahs at the shrine.

"Based on their lies, people decided Farkhunda was not a Muslim and beat her to death," Mohammed Nadir told AP.

The policeman who saw the incident, Sayed Habid Shah, said Farkhunda had denied setting the Koran on fire.

"She said I am a Muslim and Muslims do not burn the Koran," he said. "As more people gathered, the police were trying to push them away, but it got out of control," he added.

An official investigator has also said there was no evidence she had burned the Koran.

"Last night I went through all documents and evidence once again, but I couldn't find any evidence to say Farkhunda burnt the Holy Koran," General Mohammad Zahir told reporters at her funeral on Sunday. "Farkhunda was totally innocent."

Police say they have detained 18 people over the incident, with more arrests expected. In addition, 13 policemen have been suspended for having failed to do enough to stop the attack.

Shukria, a woman visiting the shrine on Monday, told the BBC that the attack was "not just an attack on Farkhunda, but on all Afghan women. They have killed us all".

Demonstrators have called for justice and planted a commemorative tree.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has ordered an investigation into her death.

The attack, near the Shah-Du-Shamshaira mosque and shrine, is thought to have been the first of its kind in Afghanistan.

Breaking with tradition, women's rights activists carried the coffin at her funeral, a role usually performed by men.

Farkhunda's family initially claimed she was mentally ill, but this has since been retracted by her father who said he was told to say so by police to reduce the chances of violent reprisals against them.

HRWF Footnote

See videos, pictures and articles at

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-32014077>

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/03/23/afghan-woman-beaten-to-death-for-a-crime-she-didnt-commit-becomes-a-rallying-point-for-activists/>

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/women-break-with-tradition-in-afghanistan-to-help-bury-completely-innocent-farkhunda-who-was-beaten-to-death-by-kabul-mob-10126976.html>

<http://www.cnn.com/2015/03/23/asia/afghanistan-woman-killed/>

Killing of 11 Sufis at Afghan mosque mystifies authorities

AP (12.2015) - Even in a country wracked by violence for decades, the killing of a senior Afghan Sufi religious leader and 10 other men stands out from the statistics: shot in the backs of their heads while bowed in prayer, in a ruthless and apparently well-planned operation.

The attack Saturday night has mystified authorities and a government investigation has come up empty handed, with no suspects so far, Interior Ministry spokesman Sediq Sediqqi said. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani on Thursday ordered a report on the probe, according to his spokesman, Ajmal Abidy.

Attacks on mosques are rare in Afghanistan, even with a history of enmity between the majority Sunnis and the Shiites who make up about 15 percent of the population.

Sufism is considered a mystical branch of Islam in which followers seek a direct personal relationship with God. Best known for the "whirling dervishes" who spin in a trance, Sufism developed alongside mainstream Islam. It is widely admired for its philosophy of tolerance and forgiveness, and includes free thinkers, scientists and poets, including Rumi and Omar Khayyam.

In Afghanistan, Sufis are among the tiny communities of religious minorities that also include Ismaelites, Hindus, Sikhs and a Jew. An unknown number of Christians practice secretly, fearing persecution despite a constitutional guarantee of religious freedoms.

The shootings at the mosque, built behind a parking lot in a shabby western suburb of the capital, Kabul, took place as Pir Saheb Mohammed Bahadur Jan led the evening prayers.

"As they were kneeling for the second round of praying, men armed with small handguns fitted with silencers came in and shot everyone from behind," said the prayer leader's son, Abdul Waheed Bahaduri.

He was recounting the scene described to him by the sole survivor of the attack, Ahmad Zia. Bahaduri had gone home to pray because there was no electricity at the mosque. The prayer room was lit by the dull flame of a gas lamp.

Zia survived by hiding under the bodies of the others, said Abdul Nahim Ahmadzai, a close friend of the Bahadur family. "He told us later that a gunman shouted in Pashto: 'No one should be left alive'," Ahmadzai said, referring to the language of southern Afghanistan, where the Taliban originated.

Following the attack, Bahaduri's father and older brother Shah Agha Jan, also a senior Sufi leader, were buried in fresh graves in the center of the mosque's concrete courtyard. With their deaths, the 28-year-old Bahaduri is now leader of 100,000 Sufi Muslims scattered throughout Afghanistan.

Sitting cross-legged on a crimson carpet, his brother's three young sons nearby, Bahaduri was incredulous that no senior government official had visited the mosque or contacted him since the attack.

"I want the president to come here and talk to us about this," he said. "It was 11 people, killed in a mosque while they prayed."

Still, in a country where everything from gender to ethnicity is politicized, Bahaduri refused to accept that the attack was politically motivated. "We are very peaceful people. My father had followers all over the world and he welcomed people here from wherever they came from and whatever religion they were," he said.

Indian priest kidnapped in Afghanistan released after eight months

WWM (23.02.2015) - Indian Jesuit priest Alexis Prem Kumar who was kidnapped in June 2014 in southern Afghanistan was released and reached New Delhi on February 22 with the intervention of the Indian government.

"Delighted at securing the release of Indian Jesuit priest Father Alexis Prem Kumar from captivity in Afghanistan," tweeted Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 22nd afternoon as the priest was on a flight to New Delhi.

Prime Minister Modi himself also rang up the family members of the 48-year old priest in Chennai – capital of southern Tamil Nadu state - and broke the 'good news' to the family.

"Have spoken to Father Alexis Prem Kumar. Informed happy family of Father Alexis Prem Kumar of his safe return after 8 months in captivity," Modi said in his tweet two and half hours before Fr Kumar landed in New Delhi.

Following the tweet, over three dozen media people, along with a dozen Jesuits and other priests, were at the international airport awaiting Fr Kumar's arrival.

Based in Afghanistan since 2011 and heading the Jesuit Refugee Program (JRS) there since 2012, Father Kumar was abducted by gunmen on June 2 at a school built and run by the JRS at Sohadat village in Herat province.

"First of all, I thank God Almighty. I thought I would be never safe. God has saved me," Father Kumar told World Watch Monitor, in an interview at the five star Ashoka Hotel to which he was escorted by government of India officials from the airport. Father Kumar also thanked Prime Minister Modi and the government for "taking lot of efforts for my release and millions who prayed for my release."

"The Prime Minister spoke to me. When he was speaking I felt that the whole of India was welcoming me. I am grateful and thankful to the Jesuit and all others who have worked for my release," Father Kumar said.

"We are thrilled. Words are not enough to describe our feelings," John Joseph, younger brother of Father Kumar, who was flown to Delhi along with his 78-year old widowed father A. S. M. Anthony and sister Elizabeth Rani, a nun of the Congregation of Foyer de Charité and principal of her convent school at Vellur, by the government round midnight, told WWM February 23.

"Our prayers have been heard. God is there," said Joseph, an engineer by profession.

Asked to shed light on his over eight months of captivity, the priest who looked extremely thin and weak declined: "I want to forget everything for some time."

"Anything about Afghanistan or what happened (to me), I am not ready to share now. Please pardon me," pleaded Father Kumar with the media who waited for him at the hotel - when the question was repeated.

"I have plenty of stories (to share). But I feel it is not the right time to share all those about the time (I spent in captivity)," reiterated the priest.

However, he pointed out: "Though I had my troubles and hard times, I feel proud that I am an Indian citizen and the country will take care of me."

Father Joy Karayampuram, the JRS South Asia spokesperson, in a press statement thanked Prime Minister Modi and the foreign ministry 'for securing the safe release' of Father Kumar.

Hailing from southern Tamil Nadu state, Father Kumar had worked over 12 years in areas of social action and development including Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka and with tribals.

Director of the JRS in India from 2005 to May 2011, he took up assignment with the JRS in Afghanistan in July 2011 and was heading the JRS operations in Afghanistan when he was kidnapped.

JRS has been working in Afghanistan since 2008, accompanying returnees home from exile in Iran and Pakistan and providing education and healthcare services in Bamiyan, Kabul and Herat. In 2013, more than 6,000 disadvantaged people from disadvantaged communities benefitted from these services, according to the JRS.

Asked whether he was frustrated by the kidnapping and captivity, Father Kumar said: "I will continue to work with people who are neglected and who have lost hope wherever I am sent."

Father Alexis had found mention in the Vatican Congregation's report on church workers killed and targeted during 2014. Fides, the Congregation's news agency, said the fate of five abducted priests belonging to religious orders, including Father Kumar, was 'unknown'.

Though neither the government nor Father Kumar gave any clue regarding the kidnappers or their motive, the Times of India in its report on his release hinted to a 'burgeoning kidnapping industry in Afghanistan'.

Quoting a 'top intelligence officer', the report on February 23 described the priest's kidnap 'as part of the conflict economy' fed by tens of billions of dollars that the international forces and community have pumped into the country since 2001.

"The law and order situation has worsened due to inherent differences within the Unity government of Afghanistan... This has given Taliban and other petty criminals an opportunity to indulge in extortion via kidnapping of foreigners either associated with journalism or aid workers or private civil contractors," the official said, recalling how most abductions ended either in payment of ransom or killing of the hostage.
