

Sikhs living in Afghanistan feel alienated, pressured to leave country

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Kabul : Afghanistan's once-thriving Sikh community is dwindling fast as many choose to leave the country of their birth to escape what they say is growing intolerance and discrimination. Once boasting as many as 100,000 members in the 1990s, Afghanistan's Sikh population, according to community leaders, has fallen to an estimated 2,500.

The reason for the exodus: endemic societal discrimination in the majority Muslim country and an inability to reclaim Sikh homes, businesses and houses of worship that were illegally seized years ago.

"I'm worried that if things don't change and we are no longer able to stay, then the only people left will be those who cannot afford to leave," said 23-year-old pharmacist Charn Singh. His family traces its roots back over 400 years to Gardez, the capital of Paktya province bordering Pakistan, where his ancestors were wealthy traders and landowners and his grandfather was an oral historian and keeper of Sikh legends.

These days, the family has little of its former wealth, having lost much of its land to what Afghan Hindu lawmaker Anarklai Kaur Honaryar called a series of illegal land grabs.

Hindus in Afghanistan have faced similar persecution. Sikhism and Hinduism are distinct religions, but many Afghans view both communities as non-Muslim foreigners.

"In all provinces they (Sikh and Hindus) owned lands, but unfortunately their lands were taken over by powerful individuals during the fighting," said Honaryar, who is also a human rights activist.

The persecution of Afghan Sikhs has remained a constant through decades of upheaval in this war-torn country.

After the Russians ended their occupation in February 1989 and Afghanistan collapsed into civil war, various mujahedeen splinter groups fought each other for territory and power. In the ensuing chaos, many Sikh houses of worship, known as gurdwaras, were destroyed - along with many Hindu temples. A UN report in 2005 said that most of Kabul's eight Sikh and four Hindu temples had been destroyed in the fighting.

In the chaos of the civil war, Afghans' tolerance toward ethnic and religious minorities hardened. That intolerance became official policy when the Islamic extremist Taliban took over in 1996.

Under the Taliban, Sikhs and Hindus were pressured to convert to Islam and forced to pay a special tax and publicly identify themselves with yellow patches on their clothing. Muslims were encouraged to avoid doing business with them.

During this period, many Sikhs and Hindus were forced to sell their land or had it openly seized by warlords. Those who fled the country often found that their properties had been seized and false ownership papers were drawn up to legitimize the theft.

The overthrow of the Taliban by the 2001 US-led invasion didn't improve conditions as much as some community members expected. Many who had fled the country found that religious intolerance had become ingrained in their war-weary homeland and that they were still second-class citizens.

The ascension of post-Taliban President Hamid Karzai in 2002 largely put an end to the illegal land seizures. But getting the land back has proven difficult.

Some have tried to reclaim their lost properties in Afghanistan's work-in-progress judicial system. But many other Sikhs and Hindus have chosen not to pursue the laborious, expensive and ultimately futile attempt to legally regain their lost and often still-occupied properties.

Abdul Qadir Arzu, a spokesman for the Kabul municipality, said these kinds of land-grabs were a common problem in Afghanistan and that the government is working to address the concerns of the Sikh community.

"It's a huge problematic issue for many Afghans, including Afghan Sikhs," Arzu said. "Sikhs have been vulnerable to war and conflict, like other Afghans."

Sikh community figures and analysts believe that intolerance for non-Muslims has grown as constant violence and upheaval has made Afghans wary of those they perceive as outsiders - and both Sikhs and Hindus are widely regarded as foreigners, more readily identified as Indians and Pakistanis. An attempt in 2013 by Karzai to reserve parliamentary seats for Sikhs and Hindus was rejected by lawmakers because, political analyst Ahmad Saeedi said, "other minorities might make demands for similar privileges."

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom noted in a 2009 report that while there is no longer any official discrimination against Hindus and Sikhs in Afghanistan, "They are effectively barred from most government jobs and face societal hostility and harassment."

At times these tensions have boiled over into violent attacks - especially at funerals, as the Sikh and Hindu tradition of cremation is frowned upon by Muslims in Afghanistan. Even today funeral processions are regularly jeered and stoned.

Despite constitutional protections for religious and ethnic minorities, neither the government nor judicial authorities have done much to address the situation, Honaryar said. "Social discrimination and second-class status within Afghan society is the only reason for leaving Afghanistan," she said, adding that complaints to police about abusive treatment were largely ignored.

For Afghan Sikhs, the constant discrimination is particularly bitter because many proclaim themselves to be proud Afghans. Some, like Arindar Singh, risked their lives to fight the Soviets in the 1980s.

"Our Muslim brothers know our history, they can see our Afghan passports and national ID cards and our records in governmental offices. But when we go to them, they still tell us, 'You are not Afghan, you are an Indian, go back to your country,'" he said.

A religious scholar born in Gardez, Singh teaches religious studies and Punjabi to Sikh children in Kabul.

"I want to say that Afghanistan is our country and this is the place of my birth," he said. "For the past three decades of war, I never left Afghanistan. I was born here and will die here."