



DORRĀNĪ

DORRĀNĪ (sg. Dorrānay), probably the most numerous Pashtun [tribal confederation](#), from which all Afghan dynasties since 1160/1747 have come. It has always played a leading role in modern Afghan politics (Yusufzai; see [AFGHANISTAN x](#)).

Tribal composition. The Dorrānī confederation is a political grouping of ten Pashtun tribes of various sizes, which are further organized in two leagues of five tribes each. The Panjpāy (or Panjpāw) league includes three major tribes, the 'Alizī, [Eshāqzī](#) (or simply Sākzī), and Nūrzī, as well as two minor ones, the Mākōzī (known as Mākōhī until the mid-19th century, sometimes simply Mākō) and [Kōgānī](#) (or [Kawgānī](#)/[Kagwānī](#), not to be confused with the [Kōgīānī](#) of eastern Afghanistan). The Zīrak (or Jīrak) league includes the Mastīzī (an unimportant group, called Mūsāzī by Ḥayāt Khan), Al(e)kōzī, Pōpalzī (or Fōfalzī), and [Bārakzī](#), with the latter's offshoot the Acakzī (cf. Glatzer, 1983, p. 220, quoting an Acakzay version of the story in which the Bārakzī are said to be descended from the Acakzī; see [ACEKZĪ](#)). The political leadership of the confederation has always belonged to the Zīrak league, shifting between the Pōpalzī and Bārakzī. Affiliations with tribe and confederation are the only ones currently in use; the leagues, though consistently mentioned in local chronicles, are never referred to spontaneously, and it remains to be ascertained whether they have ever functioned as autonomous political bodies.

In the genealogical idiom of the Pashtuns the confederation reputedly encompasses tribes descended from a common patrilinear ancestor, Abdāl



(Awdal), who himself, it is further claimed, was descended from Qays ‘Abd-al-Rašīd, the ultimate ancestor of all Pashtun tribes (481

34); hence the original name of the confederation, *Abdālī* (or Awdalī; cf. Dorn, p. 257), later changed to Dorrānī (see below). The initial heterogeneity of the confederation is reflected, however, in both its tribal terminology and genealogical organization. Although *Zīrak/Jīrak* (Pashto “intelligent”), the sobriquet for Solaymān II (Leech, p. 450; Ḥayāt Khan, tr., table), is claimed as a common ancestor for all tribes of the *Zīrak* league (a denomination like **Zīrakī* would be more likely), *Panjpāy* simply means “five legs” (i.e., “five sept”) and refers to the grouping of five independent tribes, without reference to a common ancestor. Moreover, the *Panjpāy* tribes *Mākōhī* and *Ḳōgānī* lack the typical Pashto suffix *-zī* (sg. *-zay* “tribe”), which supports the tradition that they were allogeneous tribes (Ferrier, p. 11; Ḥayāt Khan, tr., table and p. 67, referring to a tradition that the *Ḳōgānī* are descended from Abdāl’s second wife while the “*Mākō*” are truly an “adopted” tribe; cf. McMahon, who reported a tradition that the *Ḳōgānī* and *Mākō* are descended from the same father; Table 35); such genealogical imprecision generally typifies a process of adoption. It must also be stressed that the *Adōzī* tribe, though reputedly descended from Abdāl, does not seem to have ever been clearly included in the confederation (cf., however, Ḥayāt Khan, tr., p. 64, claiming that it is incorporated in the ‘*Alīzī*’), reinforcing the idea that the confederation was originally of a political, rather than a genealogical, nature.

No serious estimate of the present strength of the various Dorrānī tribes is available, but collectively they may include at least 2 million people. Earlier tentative estimates are conflicting and unreliable, though suggesting that the *Nūrzī* and *Bārakzī* were, and probably still are, the two largest Dorrānī tribes (Table 36). The whole confederation reputedly comprised 60,000 families in the time of Nāder Shah (1148-60/1736-47), but this figure does not seem to have included the many nomadic components (Elphinstone, p. 400).

History. The origin of the Dorrānī confederation has not clearly been determined. A proposed connection between the name *Abdālī* and the ancient Hephthalite dynasty seems extremely tenuous (Masson, I, p. xiii). According to some traditions, the *Abdālī* tribes entered southern Afghanistan (from *Gōr*?) in the early 15th century (*Tadkerāt al-molūk*, tr., p. 13). The earliest mention of a confederation by that name dates from the 16th century, when *Shah ‘Abbās I* (996-1038/1588-1629) bestowed supreme command of it upon the chief of the *Pōpalzay* tribe (Elphinstone, p. 397; Malcolm, II, pp. 410-11). This report



suggests that some kind of political union had already been achieved among the Abdālī tribes, perhaps in order to fight against rival tribes like the Yūsufzī, Mohmand, and others that they successfully expelled from Arachosia at that time (cf. *Tārīk-e moraṣṣa'*), and that the Safavid state was simply institutionalizing it.

At about the same time the Abdālī were mentioned as a sheep-herding (i.e., nomadic) “tribe” living, at least partly, east of Qandahār (*Ā'īn-e akbarī*, tr. Blochmann, II, p. 403). In the mid-17th century Abdālī “tribes” were again reported living near Qandahār (Enāyat Khan, p. 484). Driven from that area by Ġilzay pressure in the early 18th century, the Abdālī (or at least part of them) then took refuge in “the mountains of Herat” (Ḥayāt Khan, tr., pp. 61, 67; Leech, p. 467), whence they fought against the Persians, gained control of Herat, raided in Khorasan, and “in the course of a very few years greatly increased in numbers” (Ferrier, p. 30), suggesting that outsiders were joining the confederation en masse. Nāder Shah managed to bring them under control, however, and raised from their ranks a contingent of 12,000 cavalry under the command of an Alīzay chief (Ferrier, p. 67). At Nāder Shah’s death they felt strong enough to proclaim their independence. At a *jerga* (assembly of elders) held at the holy shrine of Šēr-e Sorḳ, 5 km southeast of Qandahār, they elected as their supreme chief Aḥmad Khan, a young member of the Sadōzī clan of the Pōpalzī tribe, son of an Al(e)kōzay mother; soon after he was formally crowned as Aḥmad Shah (1160/1747).

It was on that occasion that the name of the confederation was changed to incorporate the royal title *dorr-e dorrān* (pearl of pearls, i.e., primus inter pares), allegedly referring to “the distinctive custom of the Abdālī tribe of wearing a small pearl studded ring in the right ear”; Bellew, p. 31). The Dorrānī were thus explicitly supporters of the king, as were the so-called “Bar Dorrānī” (upper Dorrānī), a now obsolete designation for several eastern Pashtun tribes unconnected with the Dorrānī proper (Elphinstone, p. 325). From that time on the history of the Dorrānī effectively coincides with the history of the Afghan state. Unlike most other Pashtun tribes they have generally remained loyal to the dynasties sprung from their ranks and have only seldom rebelled. Notable exceptions were Ayyūb Khan’s revolt in 1297-98/1880-81 (arising from the long-standing rivalry between the Sadōzī Pōpalzī and Moḥammadzī Bārakzī for political leadership of the confederation and of Afghanistan) and a riot in Qandahār in 1338 Š./1959. The long tradition of Dorrānī loyalty to the state may explain why tribesmen did not join



anticommunist guerrillas until comparatively late, after 1358 Š./1979 (Roy, p. 136; for similar late involvement of the Dorrānī in the anti-British uprising of 1256-57/1841-42, see Yapp, 1963, p. 312; idem, 1964, p. 373). On the other hand, two centuries of political domination of Afghanistan, with associated privileges (see examples in Kakar, pp. 73-74, 83, 99), certainly explain their claim to social superiority over all other ethnic groups in Afghanistan, including other Pashtun tribes (Tapper, 1991, pp. 38 ff.). In the last decades of the royal regime, however, as actual political power became more and more restricted to a narrow circle comprising the Moḥammadzay royal clan and a handful of leading Dorrānī families who had settled in Kabul as clients of the court, educated non-Moḥammadzī Dorrānī of lower or provincial extraction gradually sought alternative sources of promotion, rallying to communist groups, mainly Parčam, where they were heavily represented in the politburo, rather than to Islamic parties, in which they were totally absent from the leadership (Rubin, pp. 87-88; see [CONSTITUTIONAL HISTORY OF AFGHANISTAN](#); [COMMUNISM iv](#)).

Tribal affiliation among Dorrānī gained an entirely new geographical consistency when Nāder Shah returned to them the lands they had lost to the Ġilzī in southern Afghanistan (Leech, p. 469; Lockhart, p. 120). He allotted them on a tribal basis that has been broadly retained since that time: Zīrak tribes were given the tracts east of the Helmand and around Qandahār and Panjpāy tribes those in the west between the Helmand and Sīstān. The former are well watered, and Zīrak tribesmen have therefore become mostly agriculturalists; in the early 19th century, however, many peasant families were still living in tents, a clear indication of their former nomadic life (Elphinstone, p. 407). In the western territories, on the contrary, scarcity of water and poorer agricultural potential account for better conservation of nomadic traditions among Panjpāy tribes. Actually the tribal geography is much more complex than a simple opposition between east and west (for details, see Ḥayāt Khan, tr., pp. 65 ff.). For example, while some Nūrzi were settled east of Qandahār (Rawlinson, p. 512; Wylie, fol. 1480), Bārakzī and Acakzī clans are also found around Šīndand, in the very heart of Nūrzi territory (*Gazetteer of Afghanistan* III, pp. 344-45; Table 37). On the other hand, in the late 18th century conquests of the Hazāra expanded Dorrānī territory toward the north, into lower Orozgān (Rawlinson, p. 517). The present tribal geography is therefore blurred, all the more so as migrations and deportations have resulted in the spread of the Dorrānī from their homeland in southern Afghanistan, always for political, rather than demographic, reasons.



Northern Afghanistan has been the main target of Dorrānī out-migration. Two different waves of colonization, both sponsored by successive Afghan governments, can be distinguished. The first and least documented followed Aḥmad Shah's imperial conquests (Ross, p. 31; de Planhol, 1973, p. 8; idem, 1976, p. 286, noting the toponym Sākzay, of unequivocal Dorrānāy origin). The second, more important wave of colonization took place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when the Afghan amirs systematically organized the colonization of depopulated Bādġīs and Afghan Turkestan, relying massively on their Dorrānī cotribalists. Several thousand Dorrānī families migrated north, most of them from the nomadic clans of the Panjṗāy tribes (Eṣḥāqzī, then Nūrzī; Tapper, 1973; idem, 1983; Table 37). Known locally as “Qandahārī,” wherever they actually came from, in their new locations they succeeded in acquiring political and economic leadership out of proportion to their numbers (e.g., only 10 percent of the total population of Sar-e Pol district in the 1970s; Tapper, 1991, p. 30).

Aside from the Acakzī, whose tribal territory straddles the present Afghan-Pakistani boundary between Qandahār and Quetta, several Dorrānī tribes also include minorities established east of Afghanistan, even as far as the Deccan (Ḥayāt Khan, tr., p. 66). They are concentrated mainly in the Punjab. Best known among them are the so-called Multani Pathans, actually Sadōzī (Pōpalzī) tribesmen. In the mid-17th century some members of the clan fled from Khorasan to Multān, in order to escape allegiance to Persia (Nabi Khan, p. 3); they were further reinforced by fellow tribesmen expelled by the Ġilzay chief Mīr Ways Khan in the early 18th century (Ḥayāt Khan, tr., p. 71; Ibbetson, p. 93). Small colonies from the Pōpalzī, ‘Alīzī, and Al(e)kōzī tribes are also scattered in various other parts of the Punjab (Rose, III, p. 339; Ḥayāt Khan, tr., pp. 65-66, 72 ff.).

Substantial changes in the geographical distribution of the Dorrānī in and around Afghanistan occurred during the 1980s. Information is scanty, and it remains to be seen whether or not all these changes will last. First, it has been reported that the civil war has produced a flow of return migration of Pashtuns from northern to southern Afghanistan. Second, there has been massive emigration from southern Afghanistan to neighboring Pakistan and Persia (see DIASPORA ix, x). According to a sample survey in 1988, nearly 75 percent of all Afghan refugees in the southern part of Persian Khorasan were Dorrānī, that is, about 280,000 people (Papoli-Yazdi, p. 62).

Sociocultural characteristics. Although a majority of Dorrānī are now



sedentary peasants or citydwellers (no figures are available), more than 20,000 families, about 110,000 people, were still nomads in 1357 Š./1978 (Table 37). Most of them belonged to the Panjpāy league for historical reasons (see above). Their summer pastures are mainly in the mountains of Ġōr (Balland), where they compete with the local *Aymāq* populations for access to grazing lands. In sharp contrast to the situation in neighboring Hazārajāt, where the Hazāra villagers have been overpowered by Pashtun nomads (mainly Ġilzī), the *Aymāq* have succeeded in keeping control of their territory; the *Dorrānī* nomads are considered only *hamsāya* (clients). Free legal right to pastureland is normally restricted to owners of springs or arable land in the vicinity, and *Dorrānī* nomads must therefore either pay grazing fees to local *Aymāq* owners or purchase springs or agricultural lands, which they then rent to *Aymāq* tenants (Glatzer, 1977, pp. 97 ff.). Some have settled on land they have bought and become seminomads, on the way to “aymaqization” (e.g., ten Al(e)kōzī families at Sōfak, 10 km northwest of Čağčārān).

Seminomadism is otherwise infrequent among *Dorrānī*, except in northern Afghanistan (Table 37). Joint families, however, frequently split into purely sedentary households that till the jointly owned lands and purely nomadic ones that take care of the jointly owned herds; shifting from one way of life to the other is easy (Glatzer, 1982; cf. Ḥayāt Khan, tr., p. 66, referring to the *Nūrzī*). Symbiotic relationships between settled and nomadic populations have thus been achieved on a much larger scale among *Dorrānī* than among *Ġilzī*.

Dorrānī pastoral culture also differs in a number of ways from that of other Pashtun nomads, though this topic has never been thoroughly studied (Ferdinand, 1969, pp. 146 ff.). For example, *Dorrānī* use specific types of camel saddle and butter churn, as well as a black barrel-vaulted tent probably of the same origin as that used by the Baluch (Ferdinand, 1959, pp. 37 ff.); they wear somewhat different felt cloaks and shoes; the sexual division of labor among them is also unique, with the men fetching water and the women milking animals; they have a more pronounced handicraft tradition (female weaving, including weaving of the tent cloth); hunting (with hounds) plays a more important role in their daily life; and, finally, trade has never been introduced as an important component of their pastoral life, probably because their winter and summer quarters in Afghanistan are not complementary, with the exception of the *Acakzī* clans that migrate across the Afghan-Pakistan boundary to the *Tōba* highlands (Hughes-Buller, p. 71).

The *Dorrānī* confederation has traditionally been governed by a powerful



hierarchy of hereditary tribal chiefs (*sardārs*). Kings depended on their support, and they held high positions in both central and provincial governments. Originally responsible for recruiting a feudal cavalry, they were consequently assigned rent-free tenancies (Turk. *toyūl*; Doerfer, II, p. 667-69) and were paid allowances in proportion to the number of horsemen they retained (for an extensive survey, see Rawlinson). They thus became a powerful and respected aristocracy, though also a potential threat to the monarch. Aristocratic government and pervasive state influence, combined with comparatively slight human pressure on agricultural and pastoral lands in southern Afghanistan, explain why feuds were traditionally uncommon among Dorrānī, aside from competition among chiefs for political power, and their country reputedly quiet (Elphinstone, pp. 389, 404; *Gazetteer of Afghanistan V*, pp. 145-46).

This peaceful situation has had durable consequences. First, Dorrānī customary law (*nark*) differs sharply from the standard *paštūnwālī*; for example, the Panjpāy tribes ignore the *maraka* (customary law court for minor disputes) and even consider the *jerga* (assembly of elders for settlement of important problems) a rather unusual institution (oral information; see also Elphinstone, pp. 404-05; Atayee, p. 67). Second, fortified settlements (*qal'a*), the architectural expression of mutual distrust between tribal neighbors, are much less common among Dorrānī than in the rest of the Pashtun area and are restricted to the landed aristocracy (Elphinstone, pp. 407-08). A final distinctive feature of the Dorrānī is their Pashto dialect, characterized by the so-called “soft” consonants (described in Penzl; see [AFGHANISTAN v, vi](#)).

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- Table 35. The Dorrānī Tribes within Pashtun Genealogy
- Table 36. Estimates of the Strengths of the Dorrānī Tribes at various dates (in numbers of families)
- Table 37. Pastoral Nomadism among Dorrānī Tribes in Afghanistan (1978)