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Afghan Shiites Embrace New Acceptance

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10-Day Religious Observance Highlights Rapid Emergence

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KABUL, Jan. 3 -- For the past week, caravans of cars have raced triumphantly around the Afghan capital, trailing huge green and red banners. Overpasses are draped with black cloth, and loudspeakers blare hypnotic religious chants punctuated with the slow rhythm of clanking chains.

This is Muharram, the 10-day period of ritual mourning -- including emotional bouts of chest-beating and self-flagellation -- observed by Shiites throughout the world in remembrance of [Imam Hussein](#) and other Shiite martyrs who died defending their faith in the 7th century.

But in Afghanistan, a Sunni-dominated country where Shiites have been a despised and oppressed minority during many periods of history, this Muharram is being observed with new boldness and political acceptance. It is a dramatic sign of the rapid emergence of Shiism under democratic rule in the seven years since the overthrow of the ultraconservative Sunni [Taliban](#).

"I think the current situation is the best Shiites in Afghanistan have ever had. We not only have more freedom, but our rights to worship are specified in the constitution," said Syed Hussein Alemi Balkhi, a Shiite cleric and member of parliament. Moreover, Sunnis are now coordinating with Shiites in observing Muharram. "They celebrate it a little differently than we do, but we respect each other," he said.

Shiites still make up less than 25 percent of the Afghan populace, which is nearly all Muslim. Many Shiites, especially the ethnic Hazaras, remain isolated in some of the most impoverished regions of the country, such as Daikundi and Bamian provinces. Here in the capital, many Hazaras are still relegated by tradition to such menial jobs as domestic servants or handcart pullers, who strain like animals under loads of furniture or commercial cargo.

But since the departure of the Taliban, which forcibly suppressed Shiism as un-Islamic, tens of thousands of Shiites have returned from exile in next-door Iran, many bringing professional skills and modernized civic views. Young

Shiite women are generally more emancipated than Sunni women here, and female voter turnout in the 2004 national elections was highest by far in Shiite districts.

Shiites have now been elected to parliament from numerous provinces and appointed to various government posts. One of the most prominent young Shiite leaders of the post-Taliban era was former commerce minister Sayed Mustafa Kazemi, who was killed in a suicide bombing last year while visiting a factory in Baghlan province, north of Kabul.

During the current Muharram celebrations, portraits of Kazemi have appeared among the posters of Imam Hussein, his martyred relatives and Iran's [Ayatollah Khomeini](#) in the markets and mosques of West Kabul's Shiite district. So have images of the late Abdul Ali Mazari, an Islamist Afghan militia leader who fought the Soviets and the Taliban. Revered by Afghan Shiites, Mazari was also known as an exceptionally cruel and ruthless commander.

The Shiite emergence here has been openly aided by the government of Iran, which has built mosques, gymnasiums and a brand-new university in Kabul, a complex of soaring blue-tiled domes and towers. This boon is viewed as a worrisome development by some Afghans, who mistrust Iran's intentions and fear that its Shiite theocracy seeks to gain undue influence over Afghanistan and weaken its government.

Local Shiite leaders, however, say they have no intention of allowing that to happen. They say that they have more open, democratic political views than their counterparts in Iran and that they have few illusions about Iran's motives toward its poorer neighbor that is being protected by U.S. troops and rebuilt with Western aid.

"There is no doubt that people are concerned about Iran's influence here," said Balkhi, who received his religious education in Iran but brought his family home shortly after the Taliban fell. "We know Iran does not want to see Afghanistan develop socially, economically or militarily, but our officials tell us they have not seen any evidence that Iran is trying to disturb our peace and stability. What we want is to be good neighbors."

This Muharram will mark the third year in a row that Afghan officials, including senior Sunni leaders, will worship with Shiites on the climactic 10th day, called Ashura. And although many Sunnis disapprove of the Shiite chest-beating known as matam, some Sunni leaders have fasted and offered meals to the poor this week.

There are fears that Taliban insurgents may attempt to sabotage these rites with a suicide bombing or other attack, and police protection has been heavy

this week around Shiite mosques in Kabul where men and boys gather to pray, chant, weep and beat their chests in a ritual fervor of grief that is expected to build to a climax by Ashura.

But many of the Shiite faithful, feeling newly empowered this week as they displayed their faith with flags hoisted high above the snow- and mud-choked capital, said nothing can deter them now.

"We feel more free and proud than ever before," said Ghulam Hazrat, 32, a laborer in shabby clothes who was preparing to enter a Shiite shrine Saturday and participate in the chest-beating ritual. "During Taliban time, the only place we could celebrate Muharram was in our basements. Now we are out on the streets for everyone to see."

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