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Afghanistan: Population of Government-Controlled Areas

A recently completed estimate of population in areas held by the Afghan Government suggests that the Soviets have failed to increase the proportion of population under their control. Despite the influx of refugees into Soviet-controlled Kabul and the flight of refugees into Iran and Pakistan from insurgent-controlled rural areas, only about 40 percent of the population lives in government-controlled areas. This percentage has gradually decreased, but at a somewhat slower rate than the decrease in the government's territorial control because government control is greatest in urban areas.

Estimates of Population

The three charts that accompany this article show the results of our estimates. A comparison of our population estimates with the assessments of district control indicates that the government has held control of the urban population since 1980 with little change. It has lost control in rural areas, a 45-percent decrease in the size of the population under its control since 1980. The total rural population has also decreased though only by 12 percent, largely through the flight of people to urban areas, Pakistan, and Iran. We estimate nearly 3 million refugees are in Pakistan and 500,000 in Iran.

Kabul's population has increased from an estimated 1.3 million in 1980 to an estimated 1.8 million in 1983 owing to the flight of rural people to escape military operations in the countryside. We have provisionally estimated about 700,000 migrants to Kabul since early 1979. Even though other urban areas have probably lost population, notably Qandahar and Herat, the huge influx to Kabul has raised the urban percentage in the whole country from about 12 percent in the 1979 census to around 20 percent now.

The government's loss of many relatively populous rural areas caused a decline in both the population and the percentage of population under government control until June 1981. From June 1981 to January 1983, despite further territorial losses, the percentage of population in government-controlled areas remained roughly the same. When we began our study, we expected the increase in the population of Kabul and the flight of refugees from rural areas controlled by the resistance to cause the percent of the population in government-controlled areas to rise significantly even while territorial control fell.

Methodology

There is considerable margin for error in our estimates, but we do not believe it is so great that we are wrong about the trend in population control. The reports for June 1981 and January 1983 indicated for each province the number of districts controlled by the government, by the insurgents, and where control was disputed—for example, the government held the district capital and the insurgents most of the remainder of the district. The reports, however, did not indicate which districts in a province fell into which category, and we had to determine the breakdown from available information on combat operations.

The report for December 1980 gave only the national totals, with no breakdown by province. We derived a provincial breakdown for December using the June assessment and combat operations between December and June.

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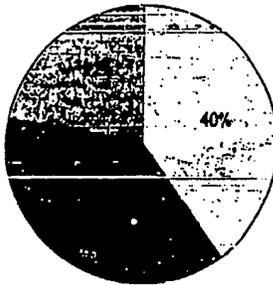
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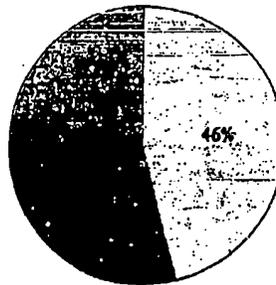
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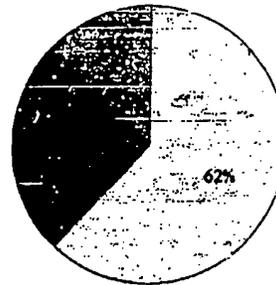
Afghan Government Estimated Control of Districts, December 1980-January 1983



December 1980



June 1981



January 1983

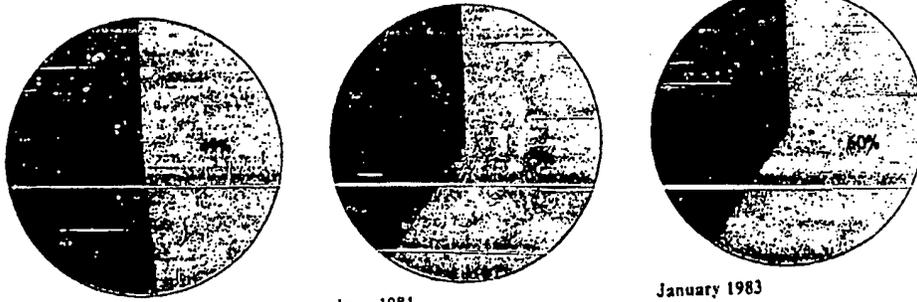
-  Insurgent
-  Government
-  Splits

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Estimated Population in Areas Held by
the Government and Insurgents,
December 1980-January 1983



December 1980

June 1981

January 1983

-  Insurgent
-  Government (Urban)
-  Government (Rural)

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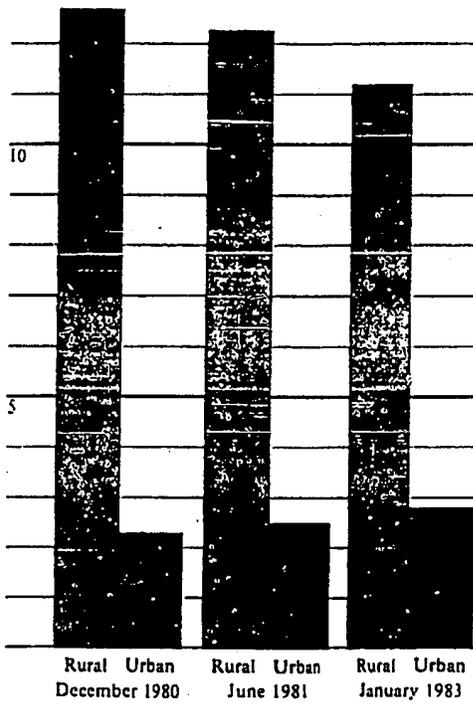
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**Estimated Urban and Rural Population in
Government and Insurgent Controlled Areas,
December 1980-January 1983**

Millions of Persons

15



Rural Urban Rural Urban Rural Urban
December 1980 June 1981 January 1983

■ Government

■ Insurgent

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Our estimates also took into account changes in population. We assumed a natural population increase of 2.6 percent per year and then adjusted for the movement of refugees.¹ We have good reporting on the number of refugees who have fled to Pakistan and fragmentary reporting on the flight of refugees into Iran and Kabul, but we know only in general terms where these refugees came from. We made several demographic assumptions: the refugees to Kabul left the surrounding rural areas; refugees to Pakistan left eight eastern provinces; refugees to Iran left Herat and Farah Provinces. We did not try to adjust population for casualties. Reliable information on insurgent and civilian casualties is scarce, and we believe that variations in casualty rates from district to district are unlikely to be significant enough to affect our conclusions.

¹ Because of natural increase in the population, the decline in the total population of Afghanistan is considerably less than the number of refugees who have left Afghanistan.



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