

Afghan/Iranian New Year

“Now Ruz”

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Now Ruz is the first day of spring and of the Afghan and Iranian solar calendar, and falls on March 21. Now Ruz literally means “new day.” It is the celebration of spring, equinox and dates back to the time when Zoroastrianism was still a powerful religion, long before Islam arrived in Afghanistan and Iran of today. At that time the whole region was called Khurasan. The name of Iran and Afghanistan as new political entities appeared later in history. This was the religion of ancient time before the advent of Islam in 7th century AD, which is at least 3000 years old. Zoroaster was born in Balkh (Wazirabad) in Afghanistan of today and was the founder of Zoroastrianism, which was the religion of ancient Persia

To understand the origins of today’s Now Ruz, which is a modified celebration of the past tradition, we must first explore the origins of the calendar that derives from. *Jalaal Malek Shah Saljuki* in the year of 467 *Hijra (Migration)* of Lunar Calendar established the *Jalaalli* Calendar. People at that time, as we mentioned above, were already celebrating *Now Ruz* before the advent of this new calendar; however this was to be the beginning of a new era in the Islamic calendar system in Iran and Afghanistan. *Khoja Nizamul Mulk Tusi* the wise Prime Minister of *Saljuks* appointed *Hakim Omar Khaiyam Naishapouri* to compile and codify the *Jalaalli* Calendar. Mathematician *AbulAbaas Logari* (*Logar is located in south of Kabul*) participated in this scientific research. As a result of this work, March 15, 1079 Christian Era, was made to correspond to the First of *Hamal(Farwardin)* Solar Calendar of *Hijra*. Later some minor modifications came into existence in which March 21 was recognized as the first day of the year (*Hamal/Farwardin 1*). As time passed, future dynasties and kingdoms eventually abandoned the *Jalaalli* Calendar. However, in the twentieth century both Iran and Afghanistan revived this calendar because it was very precise and it reasonably corresponds to the four seasons. Accordingly, the tax system on the agricultural land was made easier with the usage of this calendar.

In Afghanistan and Iran, Now Ruz is the New Year and is celebrated on March 21-this year will be the year of 1394 of the solar calendar based on the migration of the Prophet Mohammad from Mecca to Medina. *Now Ruz* is not only the first day of the New Year, but it also marks the equinox as well as the first day of spring.

In Afghanistan as well as in Iran, traditionally the New Year is celebrated during the day, and is a national holiday. In Iran, they celebrate Now Ruz for 13 days, actually is the biggest festival in Iran. It is a day full of festivities, which are called *Mella-e-Now Ruz* (New Year picnic). In this day usually people go out and join others in different forms of entertainment and activity.

Now Ruz in these countries has a special characteristic. It is a day that religion, legend, sports, music, entertainment, and joy of food all come together as one big national cultural event.

As implied by its timing and natural significance, *Now Ruz* is a time of renewal; symbolizes rebirth, awakening, cleanliness and newness. It is a tradition in Afghanistan and Iran to do the annual *Now Ruz* cleaning. It is customary for all to take a bath and cleanse themselves before *Now Ruz*. This is a ceremony of body and soul purification. New garments are worn to emphasize freshness. A thorough house cleaning purifies the physical space, merry making creates comfort, and happiness becomes a celebration in itself. Families wash their rugs and draperies, clean and wax their furniture and often repaint their homes' interior. This is very important since *Now Ruz* is a feast of hope, renewal and freshness. It is time to visit relatives, friends and pay respect to the older members of the family. Younger members of the family visit older members of the family and will pay respect to elders by wishing them a merry New Year and sometimes they kiss their hands (a sign of ultimate respect.) Relatives and friends kiss and hug and wish each other long life and good health. *Now- Ruz* is an occasion when life with all its glory is celebrated and cherished.

In Kabul, women in the city walk on beautiful fields and green hills filled with blossoms, in a tradition called *Sabza Laghad kardan* (*stepping on the new green grass*). Young girls step on the new grass and while doing so, pick up the new spring flowers to celebrate the New Year.

On *Now Ruz* there are several common outdoor activities. These include wrestling, *buzkashi*, the national horseman in Afghanistan, egg fights, snake handling, partridge fighting, and monkey acrobat. Folk music is also played using traditional instruments. Eggs, symbol of fertility, are hard-boiled and are colored in different colors. Egg fights are very amusing for both children and adults-baskets of colored boiled eggs would be brought to the picnic and people would bet each other to win other party's egg.

The farmers were also celebrating *Melah Dehqan* (Farmers Festival) in the New Year. The government would encourage farmers to increase productivity. The farmers would bring their animals for show and would win a prize if their cattle, horses, ram, were being raised properly and were productive during the last year. *Now Ruz* was also the day of new plantation (*Nehal Shaani*) in both countries. Thousands of trees and other plants were planted every year and after planting the trees farmers would dance with their shovels. The reflection of the sun on new shovels would create a magnificent view.

During the celebrations, lavish meals are prepared in Afghan/ Iranian homes. Many dishes are specially made for the occasion. *Samanak*, a very nutritious dessert made of wheat and sugar, can take more than two days to prepare and during preparation, the ladies would sing songs and dance and stay late night. The traditional *Haft-Mewah* ("seven fruit" which is also called *miwa-e-tarkada*; in Iran called *haft seen*), is prepared a few days before *Now Ruz*. It is believed that the seven fruits are related to the seven heavens and consist of fruits and nuts such as walnuts, almonds, and pistachios, red and

green raisins, dried apricots and a local fruit known as Senjid. These fruits were soaked in water a few days before *Now Ruz* to be ready for the New Year. It is also believed that when dry fruits were soaked, the fruits would be freshening which represents the rebirth and freshness.

The major meal on the day of *Now Ruz* is spinach cooked with new white hen (chicken) and white rice called *sabzi chalaw*. Spinach is considered to be the legume of the spring. Some yogurt is also put on the *sufra* (a white clean sheet for eating).

The drink of *Now Ruz* is sherbet of basil, which smells extremely refreshing. Fish (Mahi), and *jelabi*, also being served in *Now Ruz*. *Jelabi* is a desert made of white flour soaked with sugar and honey syrup. In *Now Ruz* usually the groom would take the Mahi and *Jelabi* to the bride's family. Another desert, which is made specially for the *Now Ruz* is called "Kolchay *Now Ruzi*" (New Year's cookie) made of rice flour and sugar.

In the old days in Kabul city men and women used to go to *Ziarat Sakhi Jaan* (shrine of Ali, the son in law of the Prophet, where is believed that an unknown follower of Ali has been buried) to pray and seek the blessing so their wishes and dreams would be fulfilled and come true. Also, in the old days, people believed in the magic or blessing of a rock that later to be known as the "Rock of *Zulfeqar*". *Zulfeqar* (double edge) was the name of Ali's sword. Ali was very famous in his battles with the enemies of Islam and his sword, *zulfeqar*, was double-edge. The legend goes that he had cut the rock into two pieces to show the magic power of his sword. On *Now Ruz*, those men and women who believed in this legend would go through the cut rock, which had a narrow passage. The legend had it that if they were able to pass the narrow opening without difficulty, then they were not sinful, but if they were not able to pass through it then they were sinful. In this case, the custodian of the shrine would come out and pray for them. The person would then do some charity for the poor and pay some for the custodian.

Mella-e-Gul Sorkh is a red tulip picnic that is held in Mazar-e-Sharif located in northern Afghanistan. Fields of a very distinctive red tulip would display all over the way to Mazar-e-Sharif, a spectacular view that would take the travelers breath away. Thousands of people travel to Mazar-e-Sharif in the New Year to participate in the raising of *Alam Mubarak*, where the mausoleum of Ali (the son in law of Prophet Mohammad) is located. That is a celebration exclusively in *Now Ruz* where the old cloth of the shrine embroidered with the verses of the Qur'an is raised as a sacred flag and remains standing for 40 days during which thousands of pilgrims would visit Mazar-e-Sharif, including the sick and crippled, hoping to be cured. There are many prayers made during the day and night. Musicians sing *na't* during the night, which is a special religious song.

All and all people try to enjoy themselves as much as they can on *Now Ruz*, because the omen is as such that if the first day of the year is joyful and happy the whole year will be thus.

Now Ruz has been registered as part of UNESCO intangible cultural heritage of humanity, and United Nations Assembly has recognized March 21 as international day of *Now Ruz*.

Some people question if Now Ruz is Islamic. Now Ruz is Islamic because it is based on Islamic Solar Calendar as explained above. Both lunar Islamic calendar and solar Islamic calendar is based on migration of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina.

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