



Informal power networks in Afghanistan

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Lessons for Peace (L4P) aims to help development, security, political and humanitarian practitioners embed sound, practical, evidence-based development thinking into current discussions in Afghanistan and in international capitals.

Introduction

Afghanistan has struggled to build the strong, merit-based institutions that provide the good governance and access to essential services envisioned in the Afghan constitution. In practice, governance and access to services in the country rest on a set of elite bargains among a small number of disproportionately wealthy and influential groups. These elite bargains are part of the post-Taliban ‘political settlement’ (i.e. the explicit, or implicit agreement ‘among powerful groups about the rules of the political game, the organisation of power and who benefits therefrom’ (Kelsall, 2018: 4). Afghanistan’s post-Taliban political settlement, heavily shaped by the US-led intervention and the international presence in Afghanistan since 2001, has divided the resources of the state and its constituent parts among a select set of elite factions and informal networks, while other factions have been largely excluded or marginalised (Jalali, 2003: 174–185).

This background paper explores how these informal networks intersect with formal power structures in the country, and what the implications are for development.

Informal power networks and state formation in Afghanistan

Formal institutions in Afghanistan do not exist separately from the informal power networks that have embedded themselves within the state through different processes. For example, the international intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 relied on and empowered commanders of the Northern Alliance and other armed factions to fight against the Taliban. After 2001, many of these commanders became strongmen supported by patronage networks that reward partisan loyalty. The result is that in the Afghan political order it is these networks that regulate access to public goods and economic participation (Pain et al., 2017). The state, as Sharan argues, is ‘schismatic’, ‘riven by political networks’ and ‘fostering profiteering and opportunism’ (Sharan, 2013: 347). At all levels, ‘competition and conflict between [these] political networks over the state have shaped the very nature of governance and statehood in Afghanistan since 2001’ (ibid, 2013: 337).

Much of this competition has been driven and sustained by the international community. Tadjbakhsh and Schoiswohl write that international support ‘turned into opportunities for strongmen (those monopolizing illegal trade or backed by international allies) to consolidate power and engage in corruption and nepotism’ (2008: 252–267). Massive influxes of aid, US military procurement, minimal accountability and an international preference for backing strongmen instead of building institutions have driven what de Waal terms a ‘rentier’ political marketplace (de Waal, 2015). This marketplace is characterised by intense and occasionally violent competition among elite networks for access to critical revenue streams.

Informal power networks at the subnational level

Provincial-level politics and governance help illuminate how these dynamics work. The formal state is highly centralised: government appointments, including those at district level, are usually made by the government in Kabul rather than through selection by local constituencies. There are few elected bodies or positions at the subnational level.¹ In practice, elites have used these appointments to consolidate an exclusionary and patronage-based political settlement.

Provincial governors

From the inception of the Afghan government under the 2004 constitutional order, President Hamid Karzai used the appointment of provincial governors, among other key positions, to solidify elite bargains. In theory the governor’s official remit is limited, and comes with few resources; in the absence of external relationships and access to resources outside of the state, they are heavily reliant on line ministries in Kabul (which are chronically slow to disburse funds) and on the goodwill of local officials to govern. Given the centralisation of power and resources, it may take months to receive a long-promised line ministry budget allocation, or years to replace an ineffective district governor, if official procedures are followed.

However, warlord-type governors—or those with access to substantial informal powerbases—have been able to leverage their official position to increase their power, enabling them to build and maintain their authority through patronage (Mukhopadhyay, 2014). In practice, their political relationship to central power has provided them informal or illicit access to state resources, including international aid. Such governors have used this access to extend and consolidate their patronage networks and exclude rivals (Jackson, 2016). Moreover, as Strand et al. observe, the ‘massive influx of foreign aid made formal political power an instrument for gaining more power and more wealth’ (Strand et al., 2017). Their financial resources and their ability to deploy them have enabled governors to compel government employees and institutions to act according to their will, to capture revenues, and to extort rents.

Provincial councils

Provincial councils, despite being elected bodies, function similarly. In the eyes of many Afghans, the councils’ de facto role is to facilitate—for a price—access to resources. Council members do not represent constituencies; ostensibly, they are expected to act on behalf of everyone in the province, but in practice work in the interests of those in their networks. A provincial council member might help resolve a dispute for a fee or a favour, but a pre-existing connection to a specific provincial council member, often through family, tribe or ethnicity, may be required to secure their assistance (Jackson and Minoia, 2016).

The appearance of meritocracy

The Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG), which governs provincial and district governors, provincial councils and municipalities, and the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission (IARCSC), which administers tests and oversees

¹ While district councils are meant to be elected, these elections had not occurred but were planned for 2018.

vetting for provincial and district civil service positions, are meant to ensure some level of competency and accountability among subnational governance appointees and employees. However, their efforts have yielded mixed results.

IDLG and IARCSC processes exist alongside an informal but fairly consistent scale of bribes and patronage network-regulated access to government positions (Parkinson, 2010). Meritocratic or technocratic appointments are generally allowed to proceed where they do not threaten patronage interests, and are often limited to appointments seen as peripheral or unimportant. With all appointments, the formal selection processes seem to be followed mostly for the sake of cultivating appearances rather than facilitating any fundamental or systemic change (van Bijlert, 2009). Low-level positions (e.g. teachers, civil servants) are also often granted on the basis of connections.

Citizens' access to services and public goods

The power of informal networks and the relative weakness of state institutions means that elite transactional relationships often govern Afghan citizens' access to basic services and public goods such as healthcare, education, justice and protection (Jackson and Minoia, 2016). While access to basic services has improved since 2001, the influx of external resource flows has also spurred efforts by elites to capture these resources.

Elite capture in education, health and justice

A World Bank/Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) study of essential services by concludes that the Ministry of Education, the largest single civilian employer in Afghanistan, is a precious resource for distribution of jobs and 'attracts interest as a vote bank.' It notes that teachers can instruct pupils to campaign for particular candidates and exert influence over community voting patterns (Echavez, 2016: 30).

School construction is also lucrative, and elders—who mediate site selection—can influence the process to enrich themselves. The involvement of elders is generally meant to ensure that community needs are adequately considered. However, this is unlikely to work when elders are not acting according to patronage ties. Another widespread problem that the Minister of Education has publicly acknowledged is the common practice of creating 'ghost schools', which are schools that exist only on paper but nevertheless receive funding and resource allocations (Zahoor Qayomi, 2015; Yarwar Adli, 2017).

In the health sector, the World Bank/AREU study finds similar patterns influencing access to services—albeit less intensively and with less disruption than in the education sector, given that health resources are more difficult to capture.² The impacts in the health sector include clinic site selection, corruption around employment practices, and general elite interference in the planning and delivery of health services. One of several documented examples of political interference in clinic site selection took place in Wardak province and involved provincial council members from Behsud district. The result was that Behsud, one of eight districts in the province, acquired 40 per cent of the province's health clinics (Echavez, 2016: 42).

When institutions are instrumentalised to further the interests of the powerful, they rarely act in the public interest. The Independent Joint Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee (MEC)—a body set up to monitor progress in fighting internal corruption—found that teacher recruitment 'was close to 100 per cent corrupted', with several Human Resources Heads stating that 'literally everyone in their area of responsibility was appointed on the basis of nepotism, regardless of whether the official procedures had been used or not.' As a result,

² Through the Basic Package of Health Services, financial transfers are made directly from the Ministry of Finance to implementing non-governmental organisations, which reduces the opportunities to control access to the funding involved. Education, by contrast, is delivered directly by the government. This is not to suggest that NGOs are free from corruption, but they are less likely to be as densely 'networked' as the government.

quality suffers. Even though significant progress with pupil enrolment has been made since 2001, the MEC reported that 31 per cent of grade six students cannot even write a simple word (Independent Joint Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation, 2017).

There is, nonetheless, a degree of functionality in the health and education sectors, although not necessarily according to the written rules or official policy. However, in the justice sector, Afghans in vast swathes of the country are simply unable to obtain redress due to a combination of state weakness, political manipulation and corruption. One study found that 80 per cent of Afghans had experienced corruption in seeking justice (Strand et al., 2017: 35) Many thus turn to informal dispute resolution mechanisms or Taliban courts.

Marginalisation and exclusion of groups

Institutions often prey on or exclude many of those without the requisite connections. Actors use state resources to consolidate power and then use that power to marginalise and disempower their rivals. Some areas or groups have been distinctly privileged over others, due less to their education levels or natural endowments as to their connections to ruling elite networks. In Kandahar, the marginalisation of tribes in Arghandab, Panjwai, Maiwand and other districts by the ruling Popalzai, Barakzai and Achakzai tribes results in the former having markedly fewer opportunities (Jackson, 2016). Exclusion and harassment of specific networks have led to widespread resentment and have provided fertile ground for the insurgency, particularly in the south (Jackson and Minoia, 2016).

While these patronage networks may fall along ethnic or tribal lines, divisions between them should 'be understood as a form of political network competition over the state, rather than a battle over primordial identities' (Sharan, 2013: 346). Sociocultural factors shore up mutual trust and play an essential role in determining the options for bargaining, but they do not necessarily constitute rigid boundaries (Jackson, 2016). Writing of the 2010–2011 election crisis, Sharan describes how instrumental tribal and ethnic identities were in enabling elites to conceal their practices of bargaining and exchange (Sharan, 2013).

Informal power in the security sector

Just like other parts of the Afghan state, the country's security forces are partly controlled by informal networks and strongmen that draw on the security forces to bolster their positions and generate revenue.³ Particularly in the police, senior posts are often bought for large sums of money, as they promise a generous income from bribes.

The imperative in the security sector has been the fight against the Taliban, rather than providing security for Afghans. For example, Afghan National Police (ANP) officers have been given a basic understanding of how to handle weapons but little training in civilian policing and investigation techniques. Even the creation of the so-called Afghan Local Police (ALP), which reflected a turn from top-down institution building to working with supposedly 'traditional' and 'local' structures on the community level, was created to support counterinsurgency operations rather than improve the quality of policing (Vincent et al., 2015).

As a consequence, strongmen have been tolerated as police commanders—particularly if they have been fighting the Taliban successfully—regardless of the extent to which they extracted resources and generated profits for themselves and their networks. For example, the police commander of Kandahar, Abdul Raziq, who was killed in 2018, was seen as important to the fight against the Taliban, even though he was known to be running a parallel economy and was accused of human rights violations (Aikins, 2011).

³ See, for example, Mukhopadhyay (2009).

Implications for aid and development

Although current scholarship on development now rejects the notion of importing 'best practice' institutions (World Bank, 2017), the international community's insistence on a normative vision of how things *should* work rather than on how they *actually* work has led to flawed approaches and disappointing results in Afghanistan and other fragile contexts (Levy, 2014). When building institutions, the main constraints identified by the international community have still tended to be an absence of important technical attributes—professional capacity, formal structures, availability of experienced civil servants, and so on: but technocratic approaches have often ignored informal power networks and their relationship with the state, and have failed to adjust for these realities (Jackson, 2016).

Similarly, service delivery has been promoted as a remedy to a lack of state legitimacy. However, such efforts have sometimes failed to pay attention to what citizens want most from the state (Weigand, 2017a; 2017b; Jackson and Nemat, 2018). For example, despite the extensive focus on justice and rule-of-law programmes, many people in Afghanistan still cannot solve small-scale conflicts in government courts—such as those concerning land rights—without having access to the substantial resources needed to pay bribes.

Success stories that go beyond basic service delivery in the health and education sectors and have resulted in substantially improved state/society relations are difficult to find. Some successes have come out of small initiatives at the community level. For instance, in a rural district of Kabul, in 2013/14 the police and the community cooperated closely to ensure a basic level of security for everyone (Weigand, forthcoming).

It is clear that the aid economy has fuelled the rentier nature of the state, providing resources for capture and disincentivising the government from generating local funds or capacity, or from facilitating the development of a more sustainable, Afghan-owned political order (Suhrke, 2013: 271–286). This raises the questions about how the current political settlement will evolve and the degree to which it can be sustained. Strand et al. argue that:

If the present elites and key persons in the government manage to convince the international community that a collapse of the present power-constellation threatens regional and international security, then Afghanistan is set for a slow and steady deterioration into the further fragmentation of power and territory. (Strand, et al., 2017: xiii)

This prognosis appears to reflect the diminishing returns and increasing fragmentation seen under the first term of the National Unity Government.

Clearly, only a fundamental renegotiation of the central political settlement in Afghanistan can substantially shift or change the dynamics described in this briefing. This could occur through a peace settlement with the Taliban and the subsequent creation of a new, or significantly modified, state structure and government that proves to be adequately inclusive of the key contestants for state and regional power. However, such a transformative process needs to be supported, or at least not hindered, by the international community. Peace agreements—often mistaken as political settlements—can serve to empower those with coercive power, further undermining the rule of law and excluding other voices in society (Kaldor, 2016).

Although the Taliban frame their fight as one against occupation and corruption, a future political settlement that includes the Taliban will not necessarily be motivated, or able, to overcome the current rentier structures. From what we know, any future Afghan state will need considerable international aid, at least in the short-to-medium term and until other sources of revenues are generated. Whether foreign aid under a new dispensation is likely to be better used will depend, at least in part, on the extent to which donors are prepared to acknowledge the 'achievable realities' of Afghan governance—and not simply pursue the vision that they prefer.

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