



Regional elites 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

This background paper explores the relationships between Afghan ruling elites at the centre and regional powerholders. It examines the nature of the 'political settlement' at the subnational level (a political settlement being an 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). Further, the paper considers historical continuities and disjunctures, and how the political settlement is sustained and reproduced. It also analyses the nature of volatility and exclusion, and how the current political settlement interacts with conflict and instability.

Afghanistan's regional political orders

Barfield compares the country's political geography to a set of toy building blocks, with each block representing one of Afghanistan's key regional power centres: Kandahar in the south, Jalalabad in the east, Mazar-i-Sharif in the north and Herat in the west. The formation of these ancient centres was driven by their ability to collect enough revenue from agricultural surpluses and trade to control their respective region. They are outward facing in many respects, oriented towards neighbouring Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. These international linkages have played a significant role in shaping political and economic life over the centuries.

The linkages between the regions and the centre is more complicated. Throughout Afghanistan's history, regional orders have been 'fitted together in many different ways' – at times as part of other empires, at times as independent entities – 'but each block ... survives and re-emerges as a distinct region no matter the changes in political organisation, arrivals of new populations or religions, or attempts to impose larger and more uniform identities on them' (Barfield, 2010: 48–94). In the past, as now, the government in Kabul cannot be said to truly control these regions. Instead, the ability to secure and maintain the allegiance of regional powerbrokers is essential to the viability of the central government.

The Bonn process and the interim government

Afghanistan's regional powerbrokers formed the core of the post-2001 political settlement from the outset. Men from only four political factions, mainly involved in the civil war and/or sponsored by regional powers, formed the backbone of the post-2001 interim administration (Ruttig, 2012: 1). The Taliban, who were viewed as having lost the war, were not invited to the Bonn Conference and were excluded from the state-building process. Civil society activists, including women, were explicitly side-lined by the United Nations at the request of warlords and strongmen (Vendrell, 2011). While the public narrative surrounding state-building focused on an inclusive political settlement, there was limited substance to this claim. Even those leading the process, including the UN special representative Lakhdar Brahimi, privately conceded that it was unrepresentative. What mattered to international actors like Brahimi was cultivating the *perception* of 'a legitimate and representative government' (Rubin, 2004: 7).

The reality on the ground was that *mujahedeen* commanders had assumed control amid the power vacuum left by the Taliban. They, in part, drew on United States resources and backing to do so, as part of the US strategy to use these powerholders as proxies. No effort, for example, was made to force the Northern Alliance to withdraw promptly from Kabul or the other areas they occupied (Vendrell, 2011). The remit of the International Security Assistance Force was limited – and reliance on warlord-types was, from the perspective of the US and many in the international community, the only expedient way to ensure security (Münch, 2013; Gopal, 2014). Attempts to disarm and reintegrate the various militias, which did not begin until 2003, was a widespread failure (Gossman, 2009; Clark, 2018).

The more power these regional powerbrokers assumed on the ground, the more leverage they had in influencing formal processes, thereby creating a mutually reinforcing cycle (Rubin, 2004: 7). The interim government initially divided the country into military zones largely commanded by such figures. Many of these key figures were then later appointed as ministers, governors and police chiefs. Even when the new president Hamid Karzai publicly declared the 'era of warlordism is over', the reality more closely resembled a re-creation of the civil war era warlord-centric order under new conditions (Zucchino, 2006; Jackson, 2016). For Karzai, keeping these warlord patronage networks onside became essential to the legitimacy and authority of his presidency (Jackson, 2016).

Francesc Vendrell, former Personal Representative of the UN Secretary-General and EU Special Representative, believes that the die was cast by 2002:

Bad governance, large-scale corruption, and impunity became the order of the day...[Afghans] became increasingly cynical about its motives and alienated from the new regime which, by and large, had no clear policy nor did it seem to offer an appealing alternative to the Taliban. (Vendrell, 2011)

Pashtuns mostly saw themselves as losers in this new political settlement. Despite having a Pashtun president, in many provinces various Pashtun tribes and other important groups were excluded from the political and economic order. In places such as Balkh, Helmand, Kandahar and Nangarhar Pashtuns were labelled 'Taliban' by the ruling warlords and were harassed and hunted by Afghan and international security forces (e.g. Weigand, 2017). This created grievances that continue to drive the insurgency today.

The networked state

Sharan describes Afghanistan under Karzai as a 'networked state' in which personality-based patronage had 'come to constitute the state' (Sharan, 2011). Karzai's lineage and tribal roots meant he was already identified with certain elite networks, particularly the Durrani Pashtuns. Karzai rarely attempted to confront or subdue his rivals, but instead relied on transactional bargains with personalities at the centre of these elite networks, using them

to support an appearance of dominance. His ability to unify the disparate networks controlling the post-Taliban landscape was mostly dependent on international resources and political support. Karzai used the appointment of provincial governors, ministers and other key positions to solidify elite bargains; the state was highly centralised, which ensured that the President and his ministers could use state resources (including international aid and profits from US military procurement) to purchase allegiance. At the local level, this left powerbrokers to run their fiefdoms, as long as they pledged loyalty to Kabul.

The expanding power of regional strongmen

There were instances in which Karzai challenged some of these key regional strongmen – or at least appeared to do so. One example was the removal as governor of Herat in 2004 of Ismail Khan, a former *mujahedeen* commander and warlord in the traditional vein who still referred to himself as an *emir* – a high military official. Khan's removal was secured only after Karzai threatened to resign the presidency.¹ Khan left Herat, accepting a ministerial post in Kabul offered him by Karzai, but he did not entirely cede control of Herat; the successors Karzai appointed to Khan's governorship of Herat were consistently weak, allowing Khan's network to maintain a strong influence on government and private business.²

Karzai's ties to various personality-centric networks gave state sanction to the existing regional orders as they evolved after the fall of the Taliban. Yet this traditional approach had, at least superficially, to be reconciled with democratic norms, international frameworks and donor expectations. Warlord-types tended to survive politically only where they were able to adapt to the post-2001 version of strongman politics: it was Ismail Khan's reluctance to abandon his old-style *mujahedeen*-style behaviour and adapt to the new way of doing things that appears to have led to his formal removal.

Warlords-cum-businessmen who held state positions could use them to expand their networks and resources through methods such as land grabs, the creation of private security companies, the unofficial regulation of or control over economic activities, and the capture of border crossings. Many evolved into skilful politicians and businessmen. Figures such as Ahmad Wali Karzai and Abdul Razzaq in Kandahar and Atta Mohammad Noor in Balkh succeeded by creating powerful networks around themselves, and securing favouritism from international forces and donors. In much the same way as Karzai networked his influence through the cultivation of ties at the national level, these actors networked theirs at the regional level. They sought to extend their power over as many spheres as they could, generating as much control over resources and redistributable income as possible and cutting off opportunities to rivals.

The international community and continuing instability

State institutions and positions were sought after because they were conduits for resources – be this cash, state power, the rents available from various positions (e.g. as a customs official or policeman), opportunities for private business, and so on. A role in government, however, was rarely sufficient on its own. In the early years of the international intervention, it was essential to cultivate close relations with international military forces (and, to a lesser extent, individual donors). The king-making role that the international troops played in political competitions and the massive influx of money and resources that they brought with them cultivated a 'rentier political marketplace' (de Waal, 2009). This resulted in a high degree of volatility and short-term unpredictability, particularly where international resources and presence were most heavily concentrated. Precisely where the international community most wanted stable governance, they unwittingly incentivised instability and insecurity.

¹ For a fuller account of this meeting, see Tarzi (2004).

² For more on Khan's influence in Herat, see Leslie (2015).

Strongmen formed alliances among themselves and with other powerholders such as security contractors, smugglers and drug barons. They did this to increase their bargaining power with Karzai and the international community. These alliances were often opportunistic, unpredictable and short term. As such, the networks that were created were based simultaneously on different social identities – tribe, family, ethnicity – while remaining fluid enough to be used as circumstances demand. Rivals collaborated for a limited period if their interests overlapped, then sought to undermine one another and then, at a later date, cooperated and colluded once again. This came into sharp focus during elections, which created new opportunities to renegotiate – coercively or otherwise – the terms of alliances.

The National Unity Government and regional networks

Alongside the warlords, a small class of technocrats emerged after 2001. Many were returnees who had not directly taken part in the decades of conflict but had international experiences and connections with the international community (Suhrke and Hakimi, 2011). Their influence was chiefly externally derived: they held ministerial positions in part because the international community insisted on it (and facilitated it through programs like the Afghanistan Expatriates Program), seeing them as potentially capable managers with a commitment to democracy and institution-building. They were in effect a ‘second civil service’, with their salaries partly or wholly paid directly by donors (ibid). Chief among them were individuals like Ashraf Ghani, Hanif Atmar and Omar Zakhilwal. Although not initially seen as political actors, this select group began to emerge as a political class sometime around 2009, when Ghani entered the presidential race.

There was no natural successor at the end of Karzai's second term in 2014, and the political field was fractured. The election came down to a run-off between Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, a former foreign minister and leader within the *mujahedeen* Jamiat Islami party. Fraud was widely reported as rife. The results were never released, but a power-sharing deal was brokered to create the National Unity Government (NUG). Ghani became President and a new position of Chief Executive was created for Abdullah. Serious rifts – particularly over policy appointments – emerged between the two factions early on, and these have only widened with time (van Bijlert, 2016). By the mid-point of its term, the NUG was nearly paralysed by infighting.

An increasingly volatile landscape

How and to what extent have centre–periphery relations changed under the NUG? In short, the political settlement has become increasingly volatile and fractured. Ghani has not been able to keep the same hold over his potential rivals as Karzai was. Ghani's relationship with regional powerbrokers has been fraught; he has found himself facing many of the same dynamics as Karzai did, but has more often chosen confrontation than resource-sharing and conciliation. Echoing Karzai's showdown with Ismail Khan, Ghani sought to remove the powerful governor of Balkh, Atta Mohammad Noor, in 2018. Atta resigned but, like Khan, retained strong influence over Balkh. However, unlike Khan, who mostly stayed within Karzai's orbit, Atta backed Ghani rival Hanif Atmar in the 2019 election (before endorsing Ghani at the last moment). Ghani has sought to build new alliances, but results have been mixed. Hezb-i-Islami leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar reconciled with the government in 2017 but has been critical of the NUG, and ran against Ghani in the 2019 elections.

From transactional to technocratic

Ghani's technocratic approach and limited success in transactional politics make his network different than the regional networks that have centred around warlords and strongmen. Yet he and his associates have been accused of engaging in similar kinds of networked politics and rent-seeking behaviour – even as he has tried to challenge entrenched patronage networks. Regional and other powerholders, including Ghani's vice president and various ministers, have used such accusations to justify strong resistance (Yarwar Adili and Linke,

2016; Yarwar Adili and Ruttig, 2017). Ghani's ostensible partners in government have described his 'anticorruption' efforts as mere cover for him to grab power and resources from his rivals. Some also criticise Ghani for being more American than Afghan. His response was to promote his Pashtun identity by supporting the Pashtun elements of the government, but this has given rise to serious misgivings among communities such as the Hazara.

Intensifying competition for resources

While aid has significantly decreased as compared with the Karzai years, Afghanistan remains a rentier political marketplace driven by an aid economy. There is still only a marginal licit economy, and aid still comprises around two-thirds of the national budget (Swedish Committee for Afghanistan and Oxfam, 2018). NUG infighting has been compounded by competition for rents. Giustozzi and Ali (2018) argue that the various pro-government factions have been unable to see how disruptive their intensified competition for a declining resource base has been. That the NUG has not collapsed, despite its dysfunctionality, seems in part to reflect the desire of its participants to avoid an outcome that could obstruct the current flow of rents.

Weakened territorial control

The increasingly fractured nature of centre–periphery relations has also been fuelled by the decline in government control of territory. Since 2014, Taliban territorial influence has grown significantly. The international forces that once provided security rents to local powerbrokers in volatile areas have abandoned much of the countryside. They now focus on protecting population centres and strategic infrastructure, such as the ring road, and have ceded large areas to the Taliban. Karzai depended on local powerbrokers to deliver votes from Pashtun rural areas; at least one-third of the country cannot now participate in elections due to insecurity. Many regional powerbrokers who once held sway over large parts of Faryab, Helmand, Samangan, Uruzgan and many other provinces have lost control to the Taliban.

Conclusion

The state-building process in Afghanistan post-2001 excluded key actors, including the Taliban, as well as women and civil society. Democratic rational–legal state structures were established to create the perception of legitimacy, but Tadjbakhsh and Schoiswohl (2008) argue that 'Afghan citizens have been considered as recipients of democracy rather than the driving force behind it' (p. 253). The international community has built, and continues to support, a networked state based on patronage relationships. Post-2001 Afghanistan has generally resembled what North et al. (2009) describe as a fragile limited access order, in which a group of elites is granted control over parts of the country, polity and economy, and each gets a share of the rents. According to North et al., outbreaks of violence reduce rents, so elites refrain from violence most of the time; access to state resources and services are to varying degrees regulated by these elite networks. They argue that those with a stake in the political settlement systematically undermine the development of strong, rule-based institutions because this would threaten their ability to control the state, and would diminish their resource base. Sustaining rents thus depends on the stability of the central settlement, which means that these political orders are likely to resist changes – including technocratic reforms – that threaten their interests.

These basic dynamics characterised the Karzai era. Since then, the political settlement has become increasingly fractured, more volatile and less cohesive – illustrated by the visible infighting within the NUG. This is true of the broader political landscape as a whole, with the political elite and civil society organisations becoming increasingly divided. Despite many attempts to build various coalitions or challenge Ghani's dominance, however, no rival political actors have so far been able to form a coherent or viable alternative within the existing system. The Taliban now challenge the entire post-2001 system, but non-Taliban networks have struggled to unite against this threat.

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