

**THE DYNAMICS OF THE FORMATION OF A MODERN POLITICAL SYSTEM IN
AFGHANISTAN: DEVELOPMENT OR FAILURE**

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Abstract. The article has highlighted progressive reforms in the 20th and 21st century that were primarily structural. This article will unpack some of these to understand the underlying political dynamics and the formation of a modern political system in Afghanistan and their relationship to democratic practices in order to further assess the environment in which accountability emerges.

Keywords: political system, power and legitimacy, statebuilding, democracy, government institutions, parliamentary elections, political parties, tribal representation.

Introduction

Even before the initial modernisation reforms in the 20th century, tribal representation to the monarchy was used to create ethnic balance. These lacked power since they seldom were able to impact royal decisions and were merely advisory. Using this blueprint, Afghanistan's first bicameral assembly was established in 1930, but was primarily used by ethnic groups to acquire resources and power, rather than to generate true oversight and representation. The Afghan parliament was formed and disbanded several times during the statebuilding process, and it seldom managed to represent the population since it often resulted in ethnic rent-seeking behaviour. It was not until the 1980s that political parties emerged; however these lacked ideological vision and were "shaped by persons, not programmes". Even today, there is no legal framework to sustain a pluralistic and peaceful opposition and the parliament continues to be perceived as a means to access wealth and foreign aid.

The Role of Parliament in the Political System

Starting from the parliamentary elections in 2004, Members of Parliament (MP) fundraised amongst local communities and acquired patrons amongst wealthier MPs and supportive executive officials (Lough, 2011). The use of patronage networks in the 21st century is still accepted amongst citizens since it is perceived as a sign of strength, influence, power and legitimacy (Coburn, 2010a). Although citizens might complain about this approach, it is not "because they are especially opposed to corruption, but because they are upset that they had not gained access to the privileged networks of those taking advantage" (Coburn, 2010b:6). Democratic structures of parliamentary representation are perceived to be more valued by Western donors than by Afghans, who identify political parties as dangerous in regards to ethnic balance and who prefer 'politics by consensus' as a more legit and peaceful form of policy-making (Barfield, 2010; Nixon, 2008; Larson, 2011). The parliamentary structures of citizen representation and accountability, therefore, are not experienced entirely by the Afghan population as a mechanism to generate answerability and enforcement, but rather as a means to secure resources. Broadly speaking, the democratic structure is consequently being used to secure power rather than to share it, thus reinforcing the hierarchical power flows and the relegation of citizen participation. This provides a clear example where the government structure supports the notion of accountability, but where power and traditional governance disempowers its implementation. Naturally, not all MPs behave uniformly;

there are those who promote a more democratic approach, but these will be discussed further in chapter six.

The association to democracy and democratic reforms is, in itself, a very important point to examine in order to understand the political dynamics in Afghanistan. Democracy, particularly after 2001, has been associated with Western values and experienced by some as “altogether alien and unwelcome” (Larson, 2011:21). Democracy is largely perceived to negatively impact social values and “is not currently associated with a fair, transparent system in which all citizens have the same basic rights and opportunities” (Larson, 2011:49). Although 50% of people in 2009 identified freedom as a benefit from democracy, only 19% thought that it entailed a government of the people. As a male student in a democracy study expressed, ““Democracy is the government of the people by the people for the people, but in Afghanistan we have the government of the outsiders by the outsiders for the Afghan people. The actual definition is reversed in Afghanistan”” (Larson, 2011:21). Interestingly however, it is not the political system or government structures that clash with people’s believes but the values that are perceived to touch social life. Democracy based on Islamic values is therefore referenced as a preferred method to accept elections, representation and accountability, or as Larson (2011:50) puts it “there is no way for the democratic institutions will survive in Afghanistan unless their scope and remit are considered by Afghans to coincide with Islamic principles and a fundamentally national, Afghan character”.

The biggest democratization efforts in Afghanistan have however been promoted around elections; critics claim consequently that democratic statebuilding reflects more Western donor objectives than Afghan priorities (Larson, 2011). Donors perceived elections as part of their exit strategy and as a method to establish democratic legitimacy; however, the “relationship between elections and political legitimacy is less clear cut for Afghans” since many perceive outcomes as more important than political processes (Barfield, 2010:300; Coburn, 2009). The ability to provide employment opportunities, public services and security weights more in Afghan politics than democratic processes (Coburn, 2009). Moreover, the assumption that citizen participation in elections equals democratic yearning simplifies a more complex situation.

Although people in Afghanistan have shown interest in democracy, 22% in 2009 believed that elections could not change the outcome of political action. Several studies conducted by Afghan think tanks, such as Afghanistan Analysts Network and Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, reported a lack of personal power amongst citizens (Van Bijlert, 2009b; Larson, 2010). This does not mean that people do not take ownership of their votes, but rather, that they use them as commodities to access resources by exchanging them for monetary remuneration (Coburn & Larson, 2009; Larson, 2010). Votes are reportedly sold in bulk to political parties through the head of villages; whilst urban elites perceived the rural population as illiterate and prone to manipulation, collective voting is perceived by local communities as a means to assure adequate representation (Larson, 2010; 2011). In 2009, 59% of the population answered that collective voting should precede individual voting; in 2013 this number had decreased, and 81% believed that people should individually decide their political position, regardless of community opinion. Nevertheless, due to the bartering in elections, votes tend to be cast based on ethnicity and social-economic preferences (Amiri & Benish, 2010). Therefore, the single non-transferable voting system in Afghanistan lacks transparency since there is “little reason to be accountable to anybody outside their small support base” (Saltmarshe & Medhi, 2011:6; Lough, 2011; Larson, 2009a).

Transparency in this case is given to patrons, rather than citizens, and results in inconsistent agendas, fragmented ideological positions and mistrust between voters and representatives. To summarize, although elections are used by both Afghan and foreign political elites to induce democratic legitimacy and power emphasizes the role of citizens, democratic “policies and procedures do not necessarily change the rules of the game, but rather provide a different ‘vocabulary’ for the various power struggles” (Van Bijlert, 2009a:17). Similar to the democratic structure discussed earlier (parliament), elections are used as a means to secure resources in order to address basic needs rather than a democratic process that enables citizens to negotiate the political agenda or transfer power to the government. The incomplete application of this democratic process indicates a higher priority for resources than for governance.

However, this unavoidably reemphasizes the centralization of power since only those who have it can provide it. Democratic reforms and accountability are encumbered in such context since power does not flow along government structures, but adhere to hierarchical and traditional practices. The potential for norm development, consequently, is challenged by power blockages that reduce citizens’ ability to generate answerability and enforcement.

The modern political structure vs. traditional manners

Although Afghanistan’s state building process has been influenced multiple times by foreign powers, the presence of international donors in the 21st century has also impacted citizens’ ability to participate in politics. Political agreements between the international community and the Afghan government have remained an exclusive dialogue between internal and external power-holders. For example, in 2010, the communiqué following the London Conference shows a “neglect to address the participation of individual citizens and civil society organization in political and administrative processes”.

The democratic structures, developed in the 20th and 21st century, are used for rent-seeking behavior to achieve tribal balance, rather than provide governance. Democratic structures remain superficial since they do not alter traditional power flows.

Afghanistan’s governance style resembles more of an almighty kingdom than a democratic state since it is infested with hidden agendas, patronage networks, lack of transparency and mistrust. The lack of collaboration, participation and cohesiveness is not only prevalent between citizens and the state, but also amongst government institutions, particularly between rural and urban areas. Similar to the Afghan game, Buzkashi, patronage networks and tribes work simultaneously, individually and in teams. Whilst groups might compete against one another, members of the same groups also compete against each other to climb higher in the internal hierarchy. These practices not only keep the traditional governance style alive and reinforce hierarchical power, but they also generate massive mistrust between and amongst political actors. Nevertheless, grassroots authorities continue to have a big impact in people’s lives since they operate under the social values of consensus, debate and communal representation. These initiatives, however, have been disconnected from the Afghan statebuilding process and remained a parallel system to the state.

Whether at grassroots or central level, Afghan governance has weak political values and is deeply impacted by social practices. Arguably one can say that social practices have been recreated in the political sector for so long that they have become political values, but in that case, these are based more on traditional and cultural practices than on political ideologies. The lack of national unity, citizenship identity and ideological orientation amongst political parties has prevented the development of concrete political principles and the solidification of political opposition. As a result, Afghan political dynamics are

characterized by power grabbing, ethnic allegiance, lack of transparency, mistrust and hierarchical loyalty. These are applied to acquire tribal balance and achieve state legitimacy through the centralization of power. Interestingly, despite this unofficial power structure, democratic reforms continue to take place in the 21st century, and political action keeps being justified in democratic 'language'. For example, although the democratic structures of parliamentary representation and elections have yet to change power flows, they are part of Afghanistan's on-going statebuilding process.

The political processes at the two decades of XXI century in Afghanistan has consequently show that large components of Afghanistan's political system have been forged by self-interests and power-seeking individuals. Though actors have made mean-end calculations to maximize their utilities, occasional behaviour at the beginning of the 20th century show however that progression towards democracy was not taken due to instrumental purposes but rather because there was a common understanding amongst the elite that such a progression would be good and desirable for Afghanistan. In the 21st century however, under donor influence, actors were mobilised through a liberal framing, and while the new democratic "structures do not necessarily reflect truly shared normative understandings, some actor's interests changed as a result of targeted persuasive appeals". Consequently, although the challenges for developing accountability are considerable, the potential for norm emergence is present.

Conclusion

The concentration of power and prevalence of ethnic politics appear as a consistent theme in Afghan politics. The unofficial power structure has hampered the development of a serviceoriented administration and reduced the political space for citizen participation since people are disempowered and unable to directly interact with the government. Citizens' participation in policy-making however is crucial for accountability since it demonstrates citizens' ability to negotiate political outcomes and hold the government accountable to them.

Encouragingly, in the 21st century, Afghan citizens have grown more vocal since they are deeply disappointed with the state's performance in delivering public services, notwithstanding Afghanistan's access to unprecedented amounts of aid. Citizen complaints are often ignored, repressed or dealt with violence, illustrating a gap between citizen and government priorities.

The sporadic initiatives in the 21st century tried to modernise the Afghan state through standardised institutional performance, power sharing, and checks and balances, democratic reforms remain structural and superficial. Ultimately, Afghan government institutions exist in a fundamental dual system where the structures are compatible with a modern state, but its governance process is still based on patronage relationships. In other words, structures and processes are still used to obtain power and resources, rather than to pursue a political agenda. Moreover, it highlights citizens' ability, or lack thereof, to generate answerability and enforcement by negotiating political objectives.

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