The Politics of Afghanistan

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Afghanistan

- Afghanistan is a country of little wealth, limited size, but great diversity and COMPLEXITY.
- Afghanistan is unique. It borders on 3 strategic regions (Pakistan and the sub-continent, Iran and the Gulf, central Asia) but is distinct from them all.
- Deeply and strongly Islamic, but with significant differences in practice from all these.
- This does not mean the observations or insights applicable to the rest of the world are to be discarded or Afghanistan is hopelessly malignant.
- It does mean that need to look for Afghan roots of political behavior rather than trying to reason from (outside) examples.
- One reason anthropologists tend to do better than political scientists in Afghanistan. What is a “rational choice” looks different to Afghans?
Looking at Afghanistan‘s Politics

• Important thing is not to “understand” Afghan politics but recognize the factors that will affect policy outcomes.
• Much that can be gotten wrong – failures from outsiders who apply their own priorities or perceptions and do not make an effort to see or define Afghanistan in Afghan terms.
• Rather, to be able to identify factors involved, why things happen in Afghanistan politics, and be able to think whether potential actions or policies are likely to yield particular (desired?) outcomes.
• There are multiple Afghan “politics” (as there a multiple identities).
  – National v. local.
  – State v. traditional.
  – Merit and markets v. patronage and rent-seeking.
Politics, Government, and Governance in Afghanistan

- Politics in Afghanistan does not correspond to what we in the US (or elsewhere in the developed world) define as/consider ‘politics’.
- It is simultaneously less and more than that.
- It is less because, in the sense that politics is the process that determines what government will do or not do, government can do a lot less in Afghanistan than most other places.
- Government in Afghanistan has limited capability to raise revenue internally or improve the lives of Afghans; has relied on external actors for this since 2001.
- Yet everywhere (but especially in Afghanistan), government is not equivalent to governance (how people regulate themselves to preserve social order and maintain security).
- There is always governance even when there is no government.
- The (largely non-governmental) governance of Afghanistan is also politics, even though it lacks the institutional footprint/implementation of elections, parties, accountability, etc.
- Afghanistan is weak in areas where US insists on creating non-political space (e.g., ANSF, civil service). Critical
- Afghanistan has tradition of hostility to ‘politics’ (esp. party politics) despite its importance.
- There are no non-political decisions in Afghanistan.
Afghans Know How to Live with Other Afghans

- For all that, Afghans have been relatively good at politics. “Nation of horse-traders and carpet merchants”.
- Tradition of compromise, personal links among elites (small), importance of reputation, feeling all committed together. Nationalism despite weak state.
- One reason Afghanistan is not the former Yugoslavia.
- Afghanistan did not fail as a state but was pushed by neighbors. War brought to Afghanistan by neighbors (1980s, Soviets by invasion, 1990s Pakistan by proxy).
- In the past, while Afghanistan has not been peaceful and heads of state do not get to keep jobs/lives (since Abdur Rahman), Afghans have managed to do a fairly good job of dealing with each other. Most Afghan conflicts under 18 months and less destructive. Things tend to happen fast (reflects resource).
- Beware of outsiders’ explanations like “xenophobic”, “warlike”, “medieval”, “anti-West”, “fanatical”. Afghanistan is complex, not opaque. Much of what “everyone knows” about Afghanistan is wrong. Question assumptions made by outsiders and, above all, question policies based on them.
- The old Afghan way threatened by decades of conflict, reliance on outside patrons for resources (rather than dividing Afghan resources), mobilization (along political or ethnolinguistic lines).
The Scope of Afghan Politics

• Again, lesser (state is unable to change lives except by using blunt instruments) and greater (collective decision-making is areas where the outsider does not expect politics) at same time.
• “The personal is political”.
• In Afghanistan, because of the collective orientation of society, many decisions that we assume are uniquely personal are subject to collective decision-making, hence political.
• This includes such decisions as: Who you should vote for? Who you should marry? Where should you work? Afghanistan is undecided about whether these are collective or individual decisions, tends towards former.
• Americans are used to freely make individual choices (e.g., marriage, religion) that can be catastrophic in Afghanistan if opposed by collective authority).
• Who should make these deicision is not clear. Usually family-kinship. Often qawm (affinity group, like kinship). Can be local shura or jirga in traditional collective decision-making.
• Qawm, kinship, ethnicity traditionally more powerful than politics, ideology, or their mobilized institutions (parties). They are the “deep” politics of Afghanistan.
Parliament – *Wolesi Jirga* (lower house)

- The national-level alternative power source to a highly centralized presidential system. (cf. Art. 64 on appointments).
- Supreme Court initially appeared to be seat of conservative opposition but has been dominated by Karzai appointees (parliament blocking appointee in 07 critical in emergence of parliament – this has been main check on presidential power). Ethnolinguistic dimension after 9/10 election reduces Pushtun representation.
- Many political parties, but lack stabilizing effects of a party system. Makes campaigns disorganized (w/o access to patronage n/w).
- Karzai has refused to legitimate parties, even form a pro-Karzai party. Hinders ability to organize, act collectively, hold executive accountable.
- Institution to reconcile diverse local concerns and slow representation by legitimate local leaders. Has nearest thing to loyal opposition (Dr. Abdullah).
- Importance of outside patron-client relations (corruption).
- Non-party elections ensure that local notables or their surrogates (including women) are elected.
- Potential for use of Loya Jirgas to circumvent.
Legitimacy

- Conflicts in Afghanistan are fundamentally about legitimacy.
- Thus, in a land defined by its conflicts, legitimacy is important to politics.
- Political authority, unless grounded in legitimacy (in Afghan and Islamic terms), is of limited value and capability.
- Important that the average Afghan is proud of and “takes ownership” of the post-2001 political process. Even Taliban has had to promulgate a “Taliban constitution”, something pre-2001 would have eschewed. But post-2001 achievements perceived as legitimate, not post-2001 elites.
- Difficult to achieve legitimacy if cannot tap into pre-existing sources; difficult (but not impossible) to assert legitimacy because appointed/elected to position. Others legitimate to supporters if not to Kabul. (e.g., Hazaras, IK).
- Legitimacy requires presence; why difficult for Afghan political figures to go and have comebacks (though exceptions: e.g., Dostum); why exiles started with a legitimacy deficit.
- Afghans assess legitimacy by results rather than process or intentions.
- Why insurgents target population, to show that state is illegitimate and cannot keep them alive.
- Why anything short of perfection (collateral damage, raids, cultural arrogance, wild imagination) has harmed legitimacy of foreign presence.
- Dependence on foreigners (even Islamic ones) hurts legitimacy.
“All Politics is Local”

- “All politics is local”. – T.P. ‘Tip’ O’Neill.
- This is true in the US, especially true in Afghanistan.
- Afghanistan largely resistant to generalization about local politics.
- A strong sense of Afghan nationalism does not remove profound local differences.
- Important at three levels: regional, Province, District. Key levels where any policies in future need to be implemented.
- Regional politics: need to understand a specific set of dynamics, identities of major figures. (e.g., in Loya Kandahar, local politics are tribal politics, but tribalism is different from Loya Paktia). Level of sub-national economy (linked to neighbors) in absence of functional national economy.
- Province: do not mistake for US states. All but smallest tend to be diverse, if not in ethnolinguistic terms then in tribal or economic. Governors lack knowledge, reach, links. Their constituency is Kabul, not locals.
- District: rural Afghanistan’s focus, where policies need to be implemented. Premium on local dimension. US recognizes – DDP, S-NGP to shift $.
- But centralized and statist constitution (and center-periphery tensions) make local engagement/reform difficult. Kabul insists Kabul decides.
- Importance of local knowledge (e.g., Nuristan) to identify what are the issues, people, that shape politics.
- Afghans will try and manipulate/shape knowledge/perceptions.
Religion and Afghanistan’s Politics

- Societal importance in Afghanistan.
- Makes it hard for secular-minded outsiders to realize the centrality of religion in Afghan life and politics.
- One reason why momentum especially important in Afghanistan, shows divine favor. (Resources).
- Governance – how Afghan people regulate themselves to maintain social order and maintain their security means to do what is legitimated by Islam.
- Changing dynamics in Islamic practice (differences in Sunni practice as well as Sunni-Shia division).
- Insurgents seek to use religion as source of legitimation and rallying point against foreigners and those dis-satisfied with post-2001 Afghanistan.
- Yet for insurgents, Islam is an ideology, for Afghans, a way of life\textsuperscript{12}.
Patron-Client Relations and Afghanistan’s Politics

• Patron-client relationships critical in Afghanistan’s politics.
• Competition for foreign patronage became the “real” post-2001 politics of Afghanistan, not the “nominal” politics of elections and developments.
• Now that foreigners disengaging from Kabul, may force Afghans to redefine what is “real”.
• Karzai sees gathering patronage in his hands as key to political consolidation.
• Patron-client is how Afghans decide who should get resources/goodies/jobs.
• Applies to exiles and technocrats as well.
• In 1978-2001, few Afghans thrived on merit, hence a near-total “brain drain”. Those that stayed count.
• Have been some examples of non-patronage:
  - Pre-1978 state service.
  - Post-2001 ANA.
• Insurgents also dependent on o/s patronage.
• Patronage linked to qawm and kinship, which are how Afghans build relations (more than party).
• Insurgents talk about being alternative to government (dispute resolution) but really offer alternative source of patronage.
• Patronage as the alternative to the free market.
Politics and Non-State Governance

- Afghans regulate themselves to preserve social orders on ways to reserve social order and maintain security in ways that can be legitimated in Afghan and Islamic terms.
- In rural Afghan, this has been done with minimal state intervention.
- Afghans expected to solve own problems through Afghan and Islamic ways (collective decision making, mediation, arbitration).
- Especially important in light of current limitations of state judicial system.
- Importance of *Afghaniyat* and *Pushtunwali*. Often mis-understood, expected behavior rather than “tribal law”.
- Coercive government power (police) limited pre-1978.
- Reliance on coercion and extraction can be counter-production (Loya Kandahar post-2001).
- Coercing Afghans trying to live in Afghan and Islamic ways leads to suspicion that you are neither and so have no place in their lives.
- If you tell Afghans not to do something they see as Afghan and Islamic, need to have a really good reason.
- Afghans have multiple identities/loyalties and resent those that make adhering to them inconsistent.
Ethnolinguistic Divisions

- Ethnolinguistic divisions important to Afghanistan politics.
- Not the single “key” foreigners tend to focus on (beware of ethnolinguistic maps) because it is most visible.
- Insurgency is almost all Pushtun.
- Pushtuns have cross-border dynamic with Pakistan not matched with other groups.
- State power in Afghanistan was traditionally identified as Pushtun power.
- Changed in 1978-2001, when rule from Kabul de-legitimized and non-Pushtun groups organized and mobilized themselves (doing a better job than the Pakistan-dominated Pushtuns).
- At national level, effectively binary Pushtun and non-Pushtun division.
- Divisions within groups can be more important than divisions between groups.
- Tribalism different between Durrani and Ghilzay Pushtun, Uzbeks, Nuristanis.
- One of many competing identities that Afghans maintain.
Politics and Corruption (Go Together)

• Cannot talk about Afghan politics without corruption.
• Corruption not unknown pre-78, but concern over reputation, kinship, limited worldview kept it in check.
• Post-2001, floods of money, returning exiles, foreigners.
• Desire to get yours now, because bad times may come back. (By no means a uniquely Afghan view).
• Happens at same time globalization means corruption is a threat to governance even in many more developed places (NYC, India, Brazil, Israel)
• Trend (04/05 v. 09/10 elections). 2009 elections as turning pt? Shfafiyat established 10.
• Means different things. Karzai slush fund (8/10).
• In many ways, divergence between behavior expected by patron-client relations and Western-style government.
• Corruption is how patronage takes the offensive against the private sector economy, n, and technocrats.
• Does not always win (telecoms).
• Allows insurgents to portray themselves as enemy of corruption as well as infidel foreigners.
Reality as an Afghan Political Construct

- Afghan reality. Like a high school where what the “cool kids” think defines what is real.
- One reason why every possible and impossible conspiracy theory believed. Friday sermons.
- Speed and power of bazaar rumors.
- Perceive US policies/interest through simplistic models.
- Yet Afghans believe who US “really” supports importance (Taliban, Karzai). Afghans look for evidence of patron as key factor.
- Even elites and leadership that should know better believe, do not really revert to Western views when off duty.
- Afghans willing to manipulate o/s patrons. Key is ‘who benefits’? Who strengthens relationships?
Nature of Afghanistan’s Political Divisions

• Divisions in Afghan politics often reflects disputes over economics, scarce resources.
• Many conflicts that appear to be over ethnicity are a reflection of these divisions (Khosti v. Jadrani Pushtuns, property rights in Maiwand district, Pushtun herders v. Hazara/Uzbek farmers in Bamiyan/Jowzjan, urban Pushtuns v. rural Tajiks in Kunduz).
• Land ownership and farming patterns, sources of income, important in determining political orientation.
• Importance of land and water rights in an economy based on agriculture and with the large-scale upheavals imposed on it since 1978.
• Seeking allies in these disputes determines external orientation in Afghanistan’s conflicts. (Khost, pro and anti-Karzai Kandahar).
• Potential of aid to one Afghan group (whether defined by tribal, ethnic, economic, competition) leading not only to envy but in competitors looking to alternative such of patronage/leverage to counter.
• Afghanistan as land defined by multiple conflicts, politics reflect competing interests.
Warlords, Power Brokers, and Regional/Local Leadership

- A country of strong people and weak institutions.
- Importance of those that may or may not hold elective or appointive office or, in many cases, power legitimated by traditional Afghan law and practice.
- What this means differs by regions and individuals.
- Reflects decades of ethnolinguistic mobilization for Afghanistan’s conflicts.
- Tribal dynamic means this is different in Pushtun Afghanistan from non-Pushtun. But there are multiple models.
- Political opponents (exiles, Pushtuns, those with foreign support) stress illegitimacy, human rights concerns, center-periphery concerns.
- Many of those non-Pushtuns perceived as warlords have been able to put together (through patronage and force as well as leadership) coalitions among those mobilized on ethnolinguistic lines.
- Pushtun warlords tend to be different, where tribal dimension added to extractive or repressive behavior. Fragmentation.
- Where mixed with hierarchical nature of Durrani Pushtun tribes and the economic situation of Loya Kandahar, became explosive.
Gender and Politics

- Despite the importance of gender issues (shorthand for a broad range - policy, religious, and attitudinal) – there is little political action by/for women cutting across other lines.
- Number of women are significant in Afghan politics (governor, cabinet, NGO).
- Mandated level of participation at the parliamentary and sub-national level. MoWA (as o/s client).
- Participates as members of multiple groups (usually reflecting kinship or patronage links).
- Do not perceive themselves as representing women.
- Patronage links from foreigners give access to resources.
- Hazara political institutions see greatest level of women’s participation despite relatively low level of development.
Looking Ahead: The Politics of Peace Talks

- Afghan conflicts have never been settled by high-level negotiations; they put a seal on Afghan realities.
- Agendas of outside supporters (US, Pakistan) become critical.
- Difference in cost to outside supporters (high political and financial cost to US, low political and financial cost to Pakistan’s military).
- Concern of non-Pushtun Afghans that Kabul will use peace talks to consolidate Pushtun rule in Kabul.
- Insurgents not set up (ideology, strategy) for compromise and access to state power except as part of a maximalist scenario. Retain criminal, economic, Pakistan ties.
- Doubts and non-Pushtun hostility inc. by Rabbani murder 9/11 (alim).
Looking Ahead: An “Afghan Spring”?

- Afghanistan does not have a tradition of mass political action.
- Lacks anti-colonial heritage of other countries.
- Pre-1978 politics meant Kabul, elites.
- Reflects Afghan attitudes towards politics, multiple divisions (ethnolinguistic, religious, as well as elite/mass).
- Limitations of parties or movements as tools of mass mobilization and direction.
- But Afghans have a history of spontaneous risings (Kabul 1841, 1879, 1980; Herat 1979) and riots (Kabul 2006, Mazar 2011).
- These were not tied into cohesive national or sub-national movements.
- What has changed since then includes: “new” media, telecommunications, demographic change (younger, more urban).
- Provide both the how and why (a large educated young population with limited prospects alienated both from a corrupt state and brutal insurgents, admiring yet also repelled by the foreigners’ culture, economy and worldview).
- Why a change in the current situation with parties or movements could be significant.
Looking Ahead to the Events of 2014-15

• 2014 transition plan places responsibility for future in hands of GIROA. But has demonstrated and been given ltd. capability.
• Ltd. Afghan state will have to fight war, do governance, development. Economic impact potentially decisive (hard to do anything w/o growth).
• What is going to survive the crisis of 2014?
• What will happen with the presidential and parliamentary elections?
• Karzai thinks that his approach to political consolidation and nationalism while retaining foreign links will last. Any successor to Karzai will have to rebuild patrimonial links/legitimacy. Has not identified successor.
• How much of post-2011 governance, economy, institutions and organizations will last? Legitimacy?
• Who will go back into exile when elites face reduced access to o/s resources? Go firm and face conflict? Try and cut a deal with the insurgents. Look to regional players (Iran, India, Russia?) to make up for withdrawn US support?
• Insurgents have no place else to go. War in cheap for them & their backers, both may need it for power (neither Quetta shura nor ISI would win an election).
• What happens when there is no longer aid/resources for expanded ANSF? When the state has to extract resources internally rather than from outside patrons?
Competing Models of Political Consolidation for Post-2014 Afghanistan

• US Model
  – Looks to other democratic political consolidations as model.
  – Stresses creation of state institutions, esp. non-political ones.
  – Seeks metrics of effectiveness.
  – Multi-ethnic.
  – Institutional.
  – Centralized governance
  – Build loyalty to central state.
  – Mandates gender mainstream.
  – Seeks limits to neighbor’s involvement.
  – Requires lots of outside aid.
  – Rely on ANSF.

• Karzai Model
  – Looks to traditional Durrani overlordship as model. (hierarchical rather than egalitarian, dynastic, more able to produce single leader – why they rule)
  – Stresses patronage and control.
  – Seeks control.
  – Relies on Pushtun links, backed up by deals with non-Pushtun leaders.
  – Centralized governance
  – Patrimonial.
  – Build loyalty to self as personification of the state
  – Marginalizes women in politics
  – Looks to neighbors to counter Pakistan.
  – Less dependent on outside aid.
  – Suspicious of ANSF.