Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium

Politics and governance in Afghanistan: the case of Nangarhar province

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Key messages

- Initiatives to build genuinely improved and sustainable governance in Afghanistan have faltered in large part due to a failure to understand of informal power relations.
- The process of renegotiation and reconsolidation of the existing order through new institutions and practices has taken place on the terrain of formal government structures.
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The Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) is a research programme which aims to generate a stronger evidence base on how people in conflicted-affected situations, make a living, access basic services (like healthcare, education and water) and perceive and engage with governance at local and national levels. This is in the hope of informing future policy and programming that will ultimately have better outcomes for people living in conflict-affected situations. SLRC's Afghanistan research programme seeks to generate robust practice-relevant evidence on livelihoods, service delivery and social protection that will inform better modes of international engagement in Afghanistan.

What is this study about?

Afghanistan's government is often described as fragmented and fragile. In many instances, the central government is viewed as failing to function effectively, particularly beyond the capital. This does not mean that there is disorder at the regional or provincial level. To date, the international community's governance agenda has consistently failed to consider and adequately address the more informal, relationship-based reality of how Afghan government institutions function.

Further complicating matters is the fact that subnational governance-building

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efforts have been confused and contradictory. There is a persistent lack of clarity about the role and mandate of formal institutions, including key institutions like the Provincial Governor and Provincial Council. At both provincial and district level, the lack of clarity has meant that more informal networks continue to dominate local affairs and access to resources.

The first of three case studies, this paper has sought to comprehend the local context and highlight the shortcomings of development and governance interventions. In an effort to understand the power relations at play, it explores subnational governance and access to public goods. A number of deciding factors influenced our choice of the Nangarhar province as a focus case for the study. With a large US military presence, Nangarhar has received significant aid funding since 2001. Other factors include its centrality to eastern politics; its unique identity as a regional centre of power; its critical geopolitical importance and its close linkages with Pakistan.

The inquiry was driven by three core questions:

- What regional social orders have emerged in Afghanistan, and what are the conditions that have generated them?
- How do these vary in the extent to which they provide core public goods and what are the incentives that drive this?
- How can international actors influence these orders to deliver more widely and effectively, and limit rent seeking practices?

What did we do?

This briefing paper draws on findings emerging from qualitative data collected in Nangarhar and Kabul. Between June and December 2013, 75 interviews were conducted in both the capital and the Eastern province. Most interviews were semi-structured. Interviewees were key informants comprising of parliamentarians; provincial council members; governors and district governors; ministers; civil servants, government employees and broader civil society actors; youth and human rights activists; as well as business people and aid workers.

The interviews focused on building an understanding of the following:

- The role that key actors play, both within formal government structures and outside of them.
- The role of the formal state.
- The role of individual power brokers in limiting or enhancing access to public goods and economic opportunities.

Additionally, semi-structured focus group discussions and interviews were conducted in Jalalabad and the Torkham border, as well as in three Nangarhar districts (Sukhroad, Rodat, and Dari Noor). These were selected for closer examination, with an aim to understand: how the de facto and de jure state functions in Afghanistan's districts; the relations between districts and the provincial government in Jalalabad; and how the above are linked, through line ministries or other means, to the central government in Kabul. The study also draws on a wide array of secondary data and analysis, including official statistics, news articles, field reports, historical materials and grey literature.

What did we find?

Informal governance and strongmen

The Afghan government appears centralized only on paper; in reality, power is highly decentralized and concentrated in Afghanistan's regional centres. Following decades of conflict, regional strongmen and ex-commanders were able to assert their authority in the vacuum left behind by the displacement of old rural elites. Their monopoly on violence in the early years after the fall of the Taliban allowed them to assert their authority, capture resources and appoint themselves to the de facto government. By the time the first round of elections occurred in 2004 and 2005, their role was established. In successive Provincial Council and Parliamentary elections in 2009, 2010 and 2014, many were elected to office and came to dominate provincial politics.

Strongmen and their networks of influence have deeply penetrated the state at all levels. They have overwhelmingly subverted government institutions and ultimately undermined the ability of nascent institutions to serve the needs of Afghans. Furthermore, Kabul has used governor appointments as a means of co-opting regional strongmen. For the Karzai government, for example, the appointment of provincial governors, ministers and other key positions was an important tool towards cultivating the secondary political settlements integral to creating a viable state. So the established order is consolidated rather than contested. Some technocratic appointments were made but this was only feasible in provinces (such as Bamiyan) where there are few resources to capture and where the overriding priorities of the international community are of less concern.

In fact, there is a significant overlap between provinces that most strongly exhibit these dynamics and the availability of resources (which have been co-opted by strongmen with relative ease.) Many of these provinces have international borders. They have heavy cross-border trade, and continue to have high levels of foreign troops. This means a significantly higher distribution of aid money. It also means a host of other opportunities for revenue generation, ranging from construction to the outsourcing of security and logistics. The licit and illicit extraction of revenue and resources is central to political

bargaining processes.

Monopolising public goods and resources

The appointment of Gul Agha Sherzai as governor of Nangarhar in 2005, provides a useful case in understanding the role that public good provision plays in enabling strongmen to consolidate their base. It is also a special case that shows the tactics an outsider used to prevail over an established local order. Hailing from Kandahar, Sherzai was forced to cultivate support among Nangarhar's population and gain decisive international support.

For a time, he cultivated support providing for the public good through various public works projects and other means. He cultivated relationships with commanders, including Hazrat Ali, as well as elders and tribes, like the Shinwari, that had been excluded from the political order. In particular, he worked to generate support in the southern loop districts, historically marginalized and where much of Nangarhar's poppy is cultivated, by negotiating poppy eradication schemes with international forces. The southern loop tribal leadership was forced to give up some of their cultivation and in return, tribal elders received cash, in-kind goods and development projects in exchange for publicly pledging to eradicate poppy. Sherzai's brokering of eradication schemes was seen as valuable by international forces and donors, reinforcing these relationships and his access to international resources, with Nangarhar declared 'poppy-free' by 2008.

In Nangarhar, the provision of public goods was rarely pursued for its own sake. In instances where Sherzai spearhead some improvement to governance, goods or services, it was driven by self-interest. Ultimately they are reinforcing the dependence on relationships to the detriment of the development of institutions. If roads were built, for example, the primary motivating factor is not the roads themselves. It is the support they will bring and the revenue generation through contracting companies linked to or controlled by strongmen and their proxies.

Legitimacy and power is almost always derived from the coercive control or capture of state and non-state resources. Illegal taxation and capture of the revenues from the Torkham border crossing were central to Sherzai's governance strategy. The Sherzai 'tax' netted the governor an estimated $1.5 million to $4 million per month. Sherzai redistributed a small portion of this through the Sherzai Fund, which supported local development initiatives. However, resorting to tactics that appear to be public goods provision is limited to instances where the means of providing support is mutually beneficial, or where the individual has few other options (as with Sherzai). In other words, public goods provision is merely an unintended side effect.

A 'government of relationships'

More often than not, international interventions in Afghanistan to reform governance have been characterised by a process of 'institutional bricolage' (Stark and Bruszt, 1998). This has meant that that instead of bringing about institutional and social transformation, reforms and policies have merely led to the renegotiation and reconsolidation of the existing order through new institutions and practices. This is not due to lack of ambition but a failure to understand the incentives and relationships that drive the existing social order.

US military presence and the international community has played a large role in cultivating a 'rentier political marketplace' (de Waal 2009) in Afghanistan, wherein elites jockey for favour with international actors. A competition among government officials and informal power brokers vying for access to those resources provided for the purpose of bolstering security and eradicating opium. The US military, and the massive influx of money it brought, has created a system of winners and losers in eastern politics. For the winners, access to these resources has enabled the establishment of private construction and security firms that bring wealth and power to key brokers. Access to these resources is enabled only through patronage relationships, whether they are based on tribe, family or economic ties. Formal rules and systems exist only on the surface. Access to resources ranging from economic opportunities to government jobs and access to a place at university are governed by more informal rules.

International interventions themselves have also been marked by competition, with overlapping and contradictory reforms implemented by various aid actors (donors, aid agencies and the UN). The continuing lack of clarity, oversight and consistency has unwittingly enabled the capture of state institutions for personal gain. Furthermore, the lack of coordination among donors and initiatives has allowed them greater reign to manipulate international support and capture revenue streams. This is true both among major power holders, as well as at the local level among village rivals or competing tribes.

What does this mean for policy makers?

In Afghanistan, formal government institutions and processes are allowed to function according to the rules so long as they do not threaten the interests of the powerful. Combined with the highly centralised control of government budgets and authority that undermines the effectiveness and responsiveness of subnational government institutions, those who 'play by the rules' have effectively been disempowered. Relative to those who have an external power base and access to resources outside the system, the former do not stand a chance. And the capture of formal institutions for

personal gain has been enabled by the lack of clarity regarding subnational governance institutions.

Perhaps much of this confusion could have been avoided through genuine donor coordination but the problem runs much deeper than that. Many of these governance programmes seemed to assume that nothing existed beyond the provincial capital. When in reality, sophisticated systems of local governance have long been in place. In the east, these customary institutions and the network of relationships are relatively strong and carry legitimacy. Simply imposing structures from the outside, without sufficient understanding of the local context, was unlikely to work from the outset.

In order to craft effective governance, such initiatives will have to employ a sophisticated understanding of the processes of 'bricolage' that are likely to occur. They must ensure that provincial and district bodies are both representative and sufficiently empowered to fulfil their mandate. Policy discussions of 'formal' and 'informal' governance often see them as separate systems, which can obscure the interdependent relationship between the two. Existing power relationships and systems must be considered together with the formal government.

The drawdown of US troops and the decline in the resources they provide is already having an impact on the local economy and political dynamics of Afghanistan. This is as true of those power holders who have benefitted from US military support, as it is of their rural constituencies. With dwindling international resources and attention, it may be that such power holders are less motivated to provide for the public good. Previously, the rural elite was able to negotiate benefits for themselves through the monetary benefits of opium eradication projects. Now, the drawdown and consequent disappearance of this funding has weakened their position within their communities. This is evidenced by Sherzai's downfall in the east, as well as the fact that many have already returned to poppy cultivation.

The political landscape in Nangarhar is already changing with Sherzai's resignation and replacement, as well as the 2014 elections. Whether the old social order will be reinforced through appointments and electoral processes remains to be seen. Nonetheless, transformative moments such as these allow an opportunity to re-examine the ways in which the international community has intervened. Evidence from Nangarhar suggests that a new approach that leads to genuinely improved, sustainable governance outcomes for Afghans is urgently needed.

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This Briefing Paper is based on the following SLRC Working Paper: Politics and governance in Afghanistan: the case of Nangarhar province (http://securelivelihoods.org/publications_details.aspx?resourceid=310&Page=2) written by Ashley Jackson.

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