AFGHANISTAN RESEARCH AND EVALUATION UNIT
Briefing Paper Series

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VOTING TOGETHER

Why Afghanistan's 2009 Elections were (and were not) a Disaster

Contents

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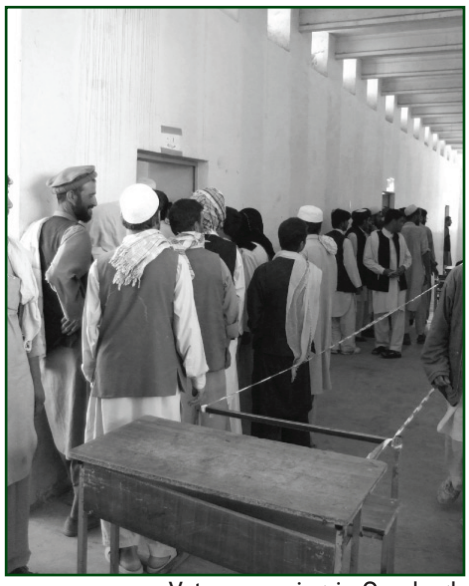
This study was partially funded by the Foundation of the Open Society Institute (FOSIA).

Overview


Voters queuing in Qarabagh

The Afghan elections in 2009 have become infamous for low turnout, fraud and insecurity. Delay in announcing the results and rumours of private negotiations have increased existing scepticism of the electoral process among national and international commentators. What has been overlooked, however, is the way in which—at least at the local level—these elections have been used to change the balance of power in a relatively peaceful manner. In many areas of Afghanistan, the polls emphasised local divisions and groupings, and highlighted the importance of political and voting blocs (which can include ethnic groups, *qawms*,[1] or even family units) in determining political outcomes. Also, while perhaps not "legitimate" by international standards, these elections reflected the highly localised cultural and social context in which they took place: a context that is often patronage-based and in which power is gained through constant struggle and dialogue between political groups and leaders.

This study presents the August 2009 electoral process as it played out in three different areas of Kabul Province: Dasht-i Barchi, Qarabagh and Istalif. In each of these locations, the presidential and provincial council elections were key events in shifting the balance of local power. These areas also demonstrate the different ways in which voting blocs functioned and, while not representative of the country as a whole, provide valuable insights into the meaning and usefulness of elections at the local level.

[1] Often translated as "tribe" or "clan"; essentially a kinship group that can range considerably in size and scope.

Four key findings from this research are discussed:

1. Bloc voting in Afghanistan persists primarily because material and political rewards can be gained by emphasising to candidates the value of a group's support; voting individually minimises the potential political capital that can be gained during elections

2. The combination of systematic fraud and widespread accusations of corruption can affect the power of winning and losing blocs; if the balance of power is changed in a certain community, accusations of corruption, which are plausible given its widespread actual occurrence, can be an important way of undermining the newfound legitimacy of the victorious group

3. Ambiguity about which candidate a bloc will support and even ambiguity about the composition of the bloc itself is strategic, because it allows greater space for negotiation. In maintaining a degree of mystery over who they voted for, political blocs (and those individuals that claim to represent them) can gain rewards from more than one elected official

4. The threat of violence, or even of a general rejection of the current system, also generates political capital for groups—particularly in a system based on ambiguity. In the context of Afghanistan, in which the state does not hold a monopoly on violence, the threat of an uprising can be portrayed by a dissatisfied opposition as very real. Indeed, if opposition groups feel that their needs and interests have not been met, they can threaten noncooperation with the electoral system and civil disruption

Essentially, it is evident that blocs are and will continue to be important in shaping the way in which elections in Afghanistan play out.

These characteristics do not always fit well with Western models of democratic elections. However, they demonstrate the way in which elections have been incorporated into local politics and used as a way to promote the interests of different groups. This has important implications for the way in which the process of democratisation is likely to develop in Afghanistan. It is very clear from this study that:

- Local elections matter and need to be prioritised by both national and international actors
- Elections in 2009 were not a complete failure: people did vote and power balances did change at the local level; but
- There is an urgent need to reassess (especially international) expectations of what an "electoral success" might look like. In a context in which an ongoing insurgency meant that much of the country was not represented at the polls, and with a flawed voter registration process that has been a poor substitute for a valid census, it was misguided to expect elections this year to be a test of "democracy" in Afghanistan
- Preparations for 2010 parliamentary elections *must begin now* if the polls are to be seen by the voting public—and the international community—as worthwhile and credible

1. Contextual Background and Political Landscapes

1.1 Kabul Province: Political overview

Kabul Province is at the centre of politics in Afghanistan. The economic and political dynamics of the province are to a large extent determined by the capital city, but some rural districts are relatively remote and exist quite independently of urban life.

Formal administrative structures exist as in other provinces: Kabul is divided into 15 districts, of which the city is one.[2] Each of the 14 remaining rural districts has an appointed district governor. However, the official constituency for presidential, parliamentary and provincial council elections (as in the rest of the country) is the province as a whole.

[2] The city district is then subdivided into 18 urban "police districts" or sectors, which are all overseen by the Kabul Municipality.

There were 41 candidates running in the presidential race, most of whom focused the key aspects of their campaign in Kabul city. The majority of these candidates were relatively unknown to most voters, with only a handful of frontrunners dominating most local discussions of the elections, particularly the current president Hamid Karzai, former minister of foreign affairs Dr Abdullah Abdullah, reformer Ramazan Basherdost, and former minister of finance Ashraf Ghani. Some other candidates also stood out, such as the well-known mujahiddin fighter Mullah Rocketi, poet Abdul Latif Pedram, and Abdul Jalil Karim, a former child prodigy who is better known as "The Genius."

Despite international focus on the presidential elections, some of the most heated and interesting campaigning in Kabul took place for the provincial council, with many voters going to the polls for local issues rather than national ones.[3] Kabul Province has 29 seats allocated for its provincial council, nine of which are reserved for women. Thirty-three seats are allocated for the Wolesi Jirga (Afghanistan's parliament), ten of which are reserved for women. The single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system requires that all candidates in the province in the provincial council and Wolesi Jirga elections compete against each other for every vote, with the highest scoring candidates winning seats. This often results in local communities that have more than one candidate not gaining a representative in an elected body.

A concern that was raised repeatedly by voters and provincial council candidates in interviews across the province was that multiple candidates representing a single community or political group would split the vote. Thus, in Kabul Province, a major local issue in these elections was how a community with multiple candidates could convince some of them to step down and voters to rally behind the perceived optimal number of candidates, in order to use the community's votes most effectively. Respondents shared clear memories from the provincial council and Wolesi Jirga elections of 2005, when the splitting of votes in certain communities meant that some communities were much better represented than others. In Kabul, with 217 candidates running for 29 seats, one provincial council candidate won with as few as 2,918 votes. Concerns over vote-splitting and that voting blocs might not be cohesive, and an awareness of the need to gain representation in the national government, were at the centre of voter discussion about the election and reflect many of the most important issues in Afghan politics today. Ultimately, communities in the three areas studied met with mixed success in their attempts to get local representatives elected to the provincial council: the residents of Dasht-i Barchi succeeded in electing eight or nine candidates, while two candidates from Qarabagh and one from Istalif were successful.[4]

The three sites selected for this research were chosen on account of their diverse political landscapes and their proximity to Kabul. This was largely a result of security constraints during the elections and a limited number of researchers being available for data collection. Nevertheless, the areas were selected to be demographically, geographically and politically diverse, representing a range of ethnicities and economic strata. A total of 170 interviews were conducted across the three areas, including in the lead-up, on election day, and afterwards. Where possible, the same respondents were interviewed before and after the polls. In addition to voters, 20 provincial council candidates, 20 individuals who worked for specific campaigns, and 30 community leaders were interviewed. Due to the fact that the majority of the research team were male, it was not possible to interview as many women as men. However, efforts were made to interview as many women as possible. Researchers also spent a significant amount of time going through election results from the Independent Election Commission (IEC) and comparing these results to responses by voters and candidates.

1.2 The three areas

Political landscapes

Dasht-i Barchi is a fast-growing suburb to the southwest of Kabul city, spanning urban districts six and 13. Exact population figures are unknown,

[3] See Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, "Patronage and Posturing, Duty and Demographics: Why Afghans Voted in 2009" (Kabul: AREU, 2009).

[4] These numbers are based on uncertified initial results by the IEC. At the time of writing it was not clear whether the ninth candidate from Dasht-i Barchi had won.

but estimates run from 800,000 to 1.2 million.[5] Residents are primarily Hazara, although a few Pashtun villages which predate the new settlement are located on the outskirts of the area. Dasht-i Barchi has grown enormously over the last 30 years, with residents moving to the area from different parts of the *Hazarajat*[6] (especially from the districts of Behsud in Maidan Wardak Province and Jaghori in Ghazni Province). A number also come from different parts of Bamiyan Province. Many have settled in the area after returning from Iran or Pakistan, where they spent some of the war years. As such, in spite of its ethnic homogeneity, divisions between people particularly exist on the grounds of their original homelands. It is common, however, for inhabitants to live in mixed communities, as opposed to those specifically determined by place of origin (although it is often the case that a certain street will have a majority of inhabitants from one particular "home province"). Each small community in Dasht-i Barchi—usually a collection of streets—centres around a local mosque, with its own religious teachers, but also has a *wakhil-i gozar*[7] who deals with day-to-day dispute resolution and has government signatory authority for official documents. Government officials, such as provincial council members, and the Kabul city municipality have little influence in the area.

Qarabagh is a district in its own right. Located about 45 minutes drive to the north of Kabul city, it is primarily rural, although it has significant social, economic and political ties with the capital. It has a population of approximately 150,000, composed of Tajik and Pashtun villages, with a few other ethnic minorities.[8] Located in a relatively flat, fertile area with complicated irrigation schemes, Qarabagh has long been an important centre for agriculture. A well-paved highway, which connects Kabul to the military base at Bagram as well as other points north, runs through the centre of town. Young men travel into the city daily or weekly to work as labourers, and businesses cater to the large number of travellers passing through each day.

As a result of these links to Kabul city, Qarabagh has a complex political landscape. It is not dominated by local elders or *maliks*,[9] as some more rural areas are, but neither have these figures disappeared. The government is strong enough to have made the area relatively stable and the chief of police and district governor are both important figures in local politics. Power is constantly being renegotiated between these officials and local leaders, and the complex number of politically active figures is reflected in the weekly district *shura* (council) meeting of 70 elders, commanders, *maliks*, religious figures and government officials.

Istalif is a more remote district in the hills above the Shomali Plain. It is a smaller district with a population of approximately 20,000.[10] The population is almost entirely Tajik, with a couple of Pashtun villages on the eastern edge of the district and a few Hazara families scattered primarily in the west. The lower areas of Istalif have an economy that revolves primarily around agriculture, particularly the growing of grapes. The centre of the district, however, is unique, with a densely settled centre along the Istalif River that is dominated by craft families such as weavers, potters and tailors, whose trade is passed down through male family members. This has created a system in which patrilineal lineages continue to cohere economically and socially more than they do in other districts in the region. The *maliks* that head these lineages continue to be strong political figures, as do several of the commanders that came to power during the

[5] Various respondents, Dasht-i Barchi. It should also be noted that population figures are highly controversial political statistics that often dictate the allocation of government and international aid. As a result, political actors with competing interests will wildly deflate or inflate statistics as they see fit. Combined with the high amounts of internal and external displacement, accurate figures are difficult to find, particularly in an election year. See Noah Coburn's forthcoming PhD dissertation, *Potters and Warlords in an Afghan Bazaar: Political Mobilization, Masterly Inactivity and Violence in Post-Taliban Afghanistan* (Boston: Anthropology Department, Boston University).

[6] Ethnic Hazara territory in central Afghanistan.

[7] *Wakhil-i gozars* are often selected by a combination of public petitions and the agreement of influential individuals in the area.

[8] Population figures are from local authorities, while the UN Sub-Office Central Region, "District Profile from 2002," suggests slightly lower numbers.

[9] Local community leaders, common in rural areas.

[10] Coburn, *Potters and Warlords*.

jihad against the Soviets. Despite the stability of recent years, these commanders continue to exert influence in local politics. The district governor and chief of police intervene in larger disputes, but these government figures are less prevalent in daily political life than such officials are in Qarabagh.

Presidential elections

In the presidential race, the principal candidates supported in each of the three areas studied reflected to a large extent the ethnic composition of those areas. In Dasht-i Barchi, the key contenders were Karzai and Bashardost. Karzai was noted by respondents as the favourite to win the most votes in the area, due to the fact that key Hazara leaders had pledged support to Karzai, as a male shopkeeper explained:

> *There was an agreement between Karzai, Khalili and Mohaqqeq. Karzai bought the elders of our qawm. It is like a family—if you think about the Hazara people, Mohaqqeq and Khalili are like the elders of the family. Now all the people are running to vote for Karzai as…we vote according to what our leaders say.*

Many interviewees also considered Karzai's regime so far as having been a key opportunity for the Hazara ethnicity to reassert political influence after a significant period of marginalisation, and so considered "more of the same" an attractive option. Bashardost was also popular among Hazara voters, partly on account of him also being Hazara, but also due to his populist stance and his perceived ability to deliver tangible services to the area.

In Qarabagh, voters were more divided over which presidential candidate to support, with approximately half of the respondents backing Karzai and the other half supporting Abdullah. Both candidates had active offices in town and Abdullah even made a personal campaign visit to the district centre. A good number of voters simply aligned themselves ethnically, with Pashtuns supporting Karzai and Tajiks supporting Abdullah, but in interviews respondents stated that support or opposition to the current government along with more local political issues were playing a major role in determining voter allegiance. The tensions between the two central presidential candidates in the area was heightened by the fact that the heads of Karzai and Abdullah's campaign for the area were two of the main former commanders in town, and voter opinion of these two men shaped their opinions about the candidates that they represented. In addition to the two main candidates there was some talk about the other 39 contenders, but while they did generate some lively political discussions this rarely translated directly into votes.

In contrast with Qarabagh, in Istalif there was less debate over which presidential candidate to vote for and much more discussion of the provincial council candidates. As a primarily Tajik area with strong links to the mujahiddin, most Istalifis supported Abdullah, who was often called "honest" and "a mujahid" in interviews. Often Abdullah's connection with Ahmad Shah Massoud was also mentioned. Respondents commonly complained that Karzai was "taking the country backwards," but some stated that they would vote for him anyway because it was important to try to maintain some sense of continuity in the government. Some felt that if successful, Abdullah would bring increased instability and corruption. As one rather cynical respondent who was planning on voting for Karzai stated, "his pockets have been filled during the last years [with bribes], thus he will serve people instead of filling the pocket once again," implying that if Abdullah were to be elected he would prioritise filling his own pockets because officials look after themselves and their followers first. A few other presidential candidates were discussed by respondents, but did not receive more than a handful of votes on election day. Candidates associated with the West, such as Ashraf Ghani, had little support because voters indicated the need for someone who knew the country well. Ghani was even considered a "foreigner" by some.

Provincial council elections

Dasht-i Barchi had an extremely high number of candidates for the 2009 provincial council elections. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly how many, given the difficulty in determining whether candidates were actually *from* the area (i.e., living there at present), or whether they were Hazaras from other areas of the city trying to build voter support there. Given that Dasht-i Barchi is known as a Hazara settlement, it made sense for

Hazara candidates living in other areas of Kabul to focus their campaigns there. Nevertheless, in interviews respondents identified roughly 100 candidates who they considered to be based in the area, and a further 50 or more who had ethnic ties to it, out of a total 524 for Kabul province as a whole.

A key characteristic of the provincial council electoral race in Dasht-i Barchi was the variety of campaign strategies used by candidates. A number of young candidates mobilised extensive media campaigns and attempted to transcend established voting blocs based on *qawm* and home province. Many, however, such as existing provincial council member Anisa Maqsudi, sought out traditional voter networks by targeting members of their own *qawm* or those who shared similar backgrounds. Maqsudi's family is widely known for political activity and originates from the Narhor district of Ghazni (more specifically from the Jirghai and Borgehai areas of that district). Before agreeing to become a provincial council candidate again, she insisted that the elders of the Jirghai and Borgehai *qawms*, now based in Kabul, ensure that no other candidate from this family group or location of origin be allowed to run a campaign.[11] This is notably strategic given the tendency of the SNTV system to facilitate vote-splitting between individuals. She also mobilised voter support in her immediate residential area (Jabor Khan) by delivering services, such as paved roads, through her NGO connections. Another source of support was her association with *Hezb-i Wahdat-i Islami*, Vice President Khalili's party. It was common in these elections in particular for candidates to be supported by political parties, albeit subversively—primarily in order to generate funds for campaigns.

A defining feature of the provincial council race in Qarabagh was that candidates associated themselves with presidential candidates or other influential figures to convince voters of their ability to provide services to the community. For example, one candidate, Haji Gul Afghan, drove around town during the campaign period with a car covered in posters of Karzai. In return for this support, Karzai's campaign headquarters in Qarabagh was similarly covered with posters of Haji Gul. However, Haji Gul did not simply gain his influence from his association with Karzai, and at times also used anti-government complaints to try to attract voters who may have been inclined to vote for Abdullah. He also used more local means of mobilising support, being the *malik* of an important village, a member of the district *shura*, and well-known in the area as a former mujahiddin fighter. His father was also a *malik* in the area and he has significant kin ties in Qarabagh, with most of his major support coming from his *qawm*.

Other candidates were active in attempting to demonstrate their connections with local and national political figures. For example, Commander Aka Khel is the brother of Qarabagh's one current representative in the Wolesi Jirga. As his supporters pointed out, he has used this relationship to help deliver "services" to various areas in Qarabagh. This includes both governmental services and more informal interventions in community issues, including recent negotiations with the district to the north that resulted in increased irrigation water for the Istalif area. While some other candidates were supported due to their religious positions, Commander Aka Khel was more often referred to as "generous," and this created a significant amount of support for his campaign. He proved his ability to provide for the community by handing medicine from his pocket to one older man who had gone to vote on election day. While the rhetoric of his campaign was based on the ability to provide services, most of these came through patronage networks based upon ethnicity, kinship and locality that supported political and social groupings in Qarabagh. These tactics appear to have been successful as Commander Aka Khel became the first of two successful candidates from Qarabagh to win a seat on the Kabul Provincial Council.

In Istalif, the most prominent characteristic of the race was its accentuation of existing political divisions in the district. Part of the intense focus on the provincial council elections reflects the significant consternation of the town at failing to elect a candidate to the Wolesi Jirga in 2005. Local political tension in Istalif is also relatively high, with several commanders and elders vying for local power. These simmering feuds almost ensured that when one commander supported a candidate, his local rivals would support a different candidate. Voters themselves tended

[11] Interview, provincial council candidate.

to support in blocs the candidate backed by the commander or *malik* with whom they were most closely affiliated. The few young men who talked about potentially voting for other candidates did so only when they were sure that no one else was listening. Reinforcing the fact that the elections were almost purely about local affairs, there was an unwritten rule that the boys in town could go through the bazaar at night tearing down posters of candidates who were from outside Istalif, meaning that the posters remaining in the bazaar were only of local candidates.

As a result, this created a slightly paradoxical situation where there were numerous candidates for a small area, each claiming to unify Istalifis and transcend local boundaries, while in fact deriving their support from established blocs of voters. Since *qawms* in Istalif continue to live in close proximity to each other, these voting blocs often coincided with geographic boundaries as well. Most of the people living in the centre of town supported Dr Haidar, who was from the area and owned a pharmacy in the bazaar, because most of his neighbours were also kin belonging to the same *qawm*. Despite this, he attempted to appeal to a wider voter-base as well. The other three major candidates in Istalif were all from geographically distinct regions and tended to describe themselves in opposition to Haidar and those that supported him.

To summrise, the electoral races for provincial council seats in the three areas had markedly different characteristics, with Dasht-i Barchi seeing the broadest range of candidates and campaign strategies, Qarabagh contenders focusing on the emphasis of influential connections for service provision, and Istalifi candidates playing most strongly on existing social and political divisions. Nevertheless, in all three areas studied, it is clear that there is a tendency to resort to the mobilisation of "traditional" blocs, namely *qawms* and family groups, to garner support. While some candidates attempted to move beyond these blocs, they were still reliant on these votes as a base from which to expand. It is therefore pertinent to now explore these blocs in greater detail.

2. Voting Blocs

Political groupings based upon *qawm*, ethnicity, lineage and religious affiliation have long been the major power bases in Afghan politics. Despite the televised debates, campaign banners, and rallies that took place in all three areas studied, the overwhelming number of those interviewed still felt that the majority of political power in the elections was based upon the ways that blocs of votes were negotiated between candidates and local political brokers. Such blocs are based on the concentric circles of political loyalties in which most Afghans live. They can include units as small as the immediate family or as large as ethnicities. This difficulty in clearly defining blocs is what makes them so important and effective at manipulating candidates.

In the provincial council elections, where local political issues dominated discussions, local *qawms* and neighbourhoods often voted in large groups. Since blocs are so electorally important, the "political brokers" that attempted to shape how groups acted at the polls became important players in both elections. These political brokers are individuals or groups who bargain with candidates on their ability or perceived ability to deliver bloc votes.[12] While it would be expected that community leaders and elders would take on this role, this research found that other individuals, including young men, were also involved in posturing and promising on the grounds of delivering "guaranteed" results. This section explores blocs in more detail by looking at the type of blocs found in the three areas, attempts at organising voting blocs, and the ways in which, while often relied upon by candidates, blocs are not necessarily cohesive or static.

2.1 Types of blocs in the three areas

As stated above, "traditional" *qawm*- or family-based blocs were drawn upon in all three areas, but the format of these blocs was slightly different in each. In Dasht-i Barchi, blocs were based on

[12] For further analysis on political brokers, see Martine Van Bijlert, "How to Win an Afghan Election" (Kabul: Afghan Analysts Network, 2009).

place of origin, but also on immediate location due to perceived needs in terms of goods and services. Furthermore, to a greater extent than the other two districts, voters in this area stated a need to vote outside the bloc system, while acknowledging its prevalence. As one shopkeeper stated,

> *I think the candidates who have the biggest qawm and the most familiarity with the people have got most of the votes...but I myself voted for a person who is not from my qawm. He can work for the people and he is not interested in qawm or geographical location. He is educated and has a good history in the community.*

In many cases, voters focused not just on common origins or kinship but also on the immediate needs of the community they were currently living in. This process of urbanisation has some implications in terms of moving toward a democratic representation that, to some extent, transcends ethnic and *qawm* barriers.

In Qarabagh, where ethnic differences between villages continued to be important for many, the most important voting blocs were based upon ethnicity and village of residence, with elders and *maliks* having significant influence. In addition to this, however, several commanders continued to exert power, and allegiance to certain commanders created other voting blocs that could stretch across villages. More than either of the other two areas studied, in Istalif voters still continue to vote in groups that overlap with the kinship groupings that shape much of daily political and social life. This mixture of elders, *maliks* and local government officials created a fairly opaque system in which *maliks* and elders were less likely to openly declare their support for certain candidates, instead attempting to hedge their bets by appearing to support as many candidates as possible. Most elders supported the provincial candidate that they had the closest kin relations with, though even this was done relatively quietly.

2.2 Attempts at organising bloc voting

In order to try to regulate and make the most of bloc voting, political brokers in all three areas attempted to reduce the number of candidates in the playing field. In two of the areas of study, local *shuras* of some kind played a key role in these attempts. In theory, once candidates in a given community or bloc have been chosen by consensus, the threat of not having the *shura's* endorsement or community pressure is often enough to prevent rejected potential candidates from standing. In Dasht-i Barchi, *shura-i qawmi*[13] played a key role in this regard. These exist for most of the major and for some of the minor *qawms* found there. However, as one resident described, a key factor preventing effective decision-making by these *shuras* was party influence:

> *[They] make decisions about how to decrease the number of candidates, but some of the people are party candidates—some are supported by Khalili and some by Mohaqqeq. That is why we cannot decrease the number: because each of the leaders wants to have their own provincial council members.*

This scenario was also attributed to the influence of presidential candidates, who served as brokers in their own right. These outside influences often appear to prevent *shuras* from being able to enforce the results of any consensus reached.

However, some decisions made by the *shura-i qawmi* were successful, including one by the main *shura* for the Behsudi *qawm*, which managed to choose two out of six candidates to support in the provincial council race. As with many political decisions in Afghanistan, however, choices such as this can be made at the last minute, in the weeks and even days before elections. At this stage, it is not possible for candidates' names to be taken off the ballots, and thus even if clear messages are sent out to the community beforehand, people may still vote for rejected candidates—either mistakenly or deliberately.

Almost all of the major political figures in Qarabagh were members of the relatively large and strong district *shura*. This is composed of approximately 70 members, most of whom are *maliks* of various villages in the district, though representation is not entirely systematic.[14] Other key political figures, such as commanders and some notable religious figures, are also members

[13] A council for a particular *qawm*.

[14] Some villages send more than one *malik* to the *shura* meetings, while other *maliks* represent more than one village.

or send representatives to *shura* meetings. This formalised but unsystematic political structure does much to shape the politics of Qarabagh and most of the key actors in town are members of the *shura* or work closely with it. As in Dasht-i Barchi, one of the chief concerns among elders in Qarabagh was the number of candidates for the provincial council from the area. In response to this, the *shura* organised a series of meetings in the weeks leading up to the election in which candidates were expected to present their campaign platforms. The council would then debate the merits of the various candidates and select two or three to represent all of Qarabagh, while the others would informally withdraw. In reality, members of the *shura* were late in planning the meeting and did not decide on either the number of candidates to select or on the process for doing so. As a result, at the council meeting where all of the candidates were meant to gather, only four of the 12 candidates from the district actually arrived and none of the most popular attended, perhaps fearing that they might be asked to step down if they did. No conclusion was reached. Despite this, *maliks* and *shura* members continued to encourage certain candidates to step down, while attempting to negotiate deals between others. In the days leading up to the election there was a growing consensus around certain candidates who voters felt were particularly strong, but the goal of only putting forward two or three candidates in order to not divide the vote was not achieved.

Relationships between local figures, *shuras*, provincial council candidates and presidential candidates further complicated the interactions of some of these blocs. For example, in Qarabagh both Abdullah and Karzai had campaign offices that were important centres for organising politically, in addition to the district *shura*. The two campaign offices were located in the centre of town, Karzai's at a popular teahouse and Abdullah's in the house of the former chief of police. Many of the provincial candidates attempted to loosely associate themselves with either Karzai or Abdullah. In exchange for this they received support from the respective campaign offices. In this sense, some of the provincial council candidates actually became brokers for the presidential candidates. At the same time, however, most provincial candidates tried not to align themselves so closely with a presidential candidate that they would lose the support of those voting for the other candidate. As mentioned earlier, the campaign heads for the two candidates were also two of the most important former commanders in town. In general, those that supported one of the two commanders also tended to support the candidate that they were representing. This worked in the opposite direction as well, and some voters commented on the fact that Karzai's campaign was not going as well as Abdullah's in Qarabagh because the head of Karzai's campaign was viewed by some as corrupt, showing how in some cases support by certain brokers could actually be detrimental.

It is notable also that in comparison with the brokering roles of the *qawmi* councils in Dasht-i Barchi and the district council in Qarabagh, in Istalif there was no similar public institution to perform such a function. Instead, it was rumoured that one of the main commanders in town had called together the four leading candidates and asked some of them to step aside. It was said that he suggested that the winning candidate should compensate any of those that stepped aside for what they had spent on their campaign. One of the candidates confirmed that he had been asked to step aside and would have been willing if the other candidates had also agreed to an open debate. Such a public debate was never organised and of the four main candidates in Istalif, none seemed to seriously consider stepping down. It appears that a number of influential individuals such as this commander took on this brokering role, speaking to candidates separately. As a result of these numerous brokers and a lack of a public forum, the calls for candidates to step aside in Istalif were not as coherent or as public as they were in Dasht-i Barchi or Qarabagh.

In each of the fieldsites, negotiations concerning candidates and blocs were thus a combination of public discussions, in places such as *shura* meetings, and private discussions among local influential figures. These negotiations and discussions often failed to actually reduce the number of candidates, but in many cases did seem to solidify the opinions of various voting blocs.

2.3 Blocs are dynamic and not always cohesive

While there is certainly a reliance on the performance of blocs—and on the part of candidates, in the power of brokers to be able to deliver cohesive blocs of votes—they are by no means entirely static or guaranteed. At the highest level, the negotiations between Karzai and Hazara leaders demonstrate the power of ethnic political blocs, though many voters made a point of stating in interviews that they did not vote strictly along these lines. While there was a tendency for voters to vote together in blocs, no broker actually controlled all the votes of all who claimed membership to the group. Many respondents suggested that families tended to vote together in blocs, though even here there were exceptions, particularly among the youth. This flexibility meant that rarely are political blocs simply a case of brokers manipulating voters, and there is ample evidence of voters actually manipulating both the candidates and the brokers who claim to be delivering votes.

Almost all voters interviewed in Dasht-i Barchi were keen to emphasise that these elections would be different than those in 2004-2005 because there was more "awareness" among the people. One shopkeeper explained that while in the last elections parties or their leaders had determined who people voted for, "this year people have become aware of the process and candidates, and they will elect candidates who have ability and work experience." Furthermore, it is evident that in Dasht-i Barchi in particular, voting blocs are changing. Another shopkeeper described this in some detail: "We are seeing that most of the mullahs and whitebeards are talking in the mosques, and they are communicating with each other and supporting the candidates. These things have an important role in the provinces; they are not so important in Kabul [city]."

As part of urbanisation processes, residents of Dasht-i Barchi appear to be at a transition point, breaking with some of the forms of allegiance more prevalent in rural areas—loyalty to their birthplace or *qawm*—and forming new ones on the basis of immediate needs in their current place of residence. The role of brokers for *qawm* groups and original homelands thus appears to be weakening, with voters choosing to prioritise immediate concerns instead. What is crucial for voters, however, is a sense of *ashnai* or familiarity with the candidate, in order that they will be able to hold them to account to deliver on promises at a later stage. Voters described this as the process of *ekhan gereftan* (literally, "the ability to take someone by the collar and demand accountability"). It appears that the source of this familiarity can be flexible, and thus if a voter such as lives on the same street or attends the same English course as a candidate, they may gain the necessary personal familiarity with them in order to vote for them. In contrast with this, in more rural areas like Istalif, where younger men are still very dependent on the older men in the family to arrange marriages and help with the capital to either start a business or pay for a wedding, to go against the desires of an elder potentially had more serious repercussions. As IEC results from various polling stations show, in these areas blocs based upon kinship and locality continue to cohere strongly, with almost all the votes in certain areas going to the candidate supported by the blocs in the area.

3. Why Blocs Persist and Continue to Shape Elections

Having established that voting blocs very much influence the way in which politics works in the three areas studied, and having looked at these blocs in more detail, it is necessary to explore why they persist in communities and how they shape the electoral process. Awareness about how the electoral system may be shaped and manipulated has increased significantly among voters, candidates, brokers and political groups since the first round of elections in 2004. The most notable way in which these actors have attempted to adapt local Afghan politics to the electoral system is by drawing on local political groups that vote as blocs, or at least on perceptions of these blocs. This section highlights five of the themes which arise from

the information presented in sections 2 and 3:

- Blocs persist *because* acting individually wastes political capital
- Both corruption and allegations of corruption can be used by candidates and blocs
- Political ambiguity is desirable
- Threatening to use violence or leaving the system instead of playing the electoral game is a valuable bargaining tool
- Communities that are most successful at controlling both candidates and voting blocs are best represented among elected officials

These issues are crucial to understanding the reasons behind and effects of the reliance on blocs within the electoral system in Afghanistan, and will play a significant role in preparations for the Wolesi Jirga elections in 2010.

3.1 Blocs persist *because* acting individually wastes political capital

One of the most important consequences of bloc voting in Afghanistan is that it disincentivises the individual thought and choice often associated with Western conceptions of representative democratic elections. This is because it is common practice in Afghanistan for communities and brokers to transfer their votes and support of candidates into actual material aid from the government and other sources. Bloc votes generate political capital in the form of potential patronage gains and the greater the amount of votes promised and gathered, the greater the potential rewards for a given community. It follows therefore that a political group or community that splits their votes and does not act collectively risks losing significant returns. In addition, voting for a candidate who they think might lose the election is to risk losing the ability to approach the next administration for public funds for the community. Particularly in Istalif and Qarabagh, there was the perception among many Tajiks who had voted for Qanooni in the elections of 2004 that they had been punished by the Karzai administration for this support, whereas other areas that had supported Karzai had received increased public funds. As one man from Istalif complained, "In the previous election most of our votes went to Qanooni and as a result Karzai punished us by not making any contributions to Istalif."

This principle also applies to local-level politics, albeit on a smaller scale: In 2009, respondents talked about the advantages of supporting provincial council candidates who were themselves supported by the presidential candidate considered most likely to win. Thus, there is considerable advantage for blocs not only to form and bargain with candidates, but to form and bargain with those they consider most likely to be successful.

While the secret balloting system means that voters feel less community pressure to vote as a bloc, many Afghans do not trust the impartiality or anonymity of system, as became clear in 2004 and 2005. One influential man in Istalif complained that in the 2005 elections he publically supported Qanooni, but then decided to vote for Karzai since it appeared that he would win. As he was putting his ballot in the box the man behind him grabbed it, saw that he had voted for Karzai and exposed his hypocrisy to the community. These concerns became more serious in the light of new stipulations in 2009 dictating that counting take place and results be displayed at the polling stations instead of provincial centres. This, along with the fact that many political communities tend to live together and vote at the same polling station, makes it increasingly easy for candidates to identify where their support-base actually was—and more importantly, where it was not.

This is not to imply, however, that all voting blocs are actually as cohesive as brokers claim to candidates that they are. As outlined in Section 2, not all members of a certain group will vote in the way they are expected to. Furthermore, it is in the interests of brokers to persuade candidates of the size and infallibility of their bloc, so as to gain as much capital as possible. The fact that brokers attempt to negotiate with multiple candidates simultaneously suggests that it is actually the *perception* of the voting bloc that provides power, to both the bloc itself and the brokers associated with it. This was demonstrated in Dasht-i Barchi on election day, when a group of elders outside a polling station vocally professed their loyalty to a visiting candidate, only to profess their loyalty to a different candidate a few minutes later, after the other had left. It also occurs on the level of individual voters making promises to multiple candidates. According to one disappointed candidate after the elections,

this is a general trait in Afghanistan:

> *Afghans have a habit of promising votes to everyone but still acting according to their own interest. For example, if Abdullah wins or Karzai wins, people will say they supported both, even though we know no one will support Abdullah. The same case happened with me. I received many promises from different types of people, but I see that the result is something different.*

As such, the extent of the influence of voter blocs and brokers depends on their skills of persuasion, and the extent to which they can convince candidates of the reliability of their bloc. Evidently, if the promises made in elections do not translate into actual votes, it is possible that candidates may find out (as mentioned above), and communities may have subsequent problems extracting patronage or services from them. As a result, many voters not only feel significant community pressure to vote as a bloc, but it is generally in their best interest to vote in such a manner given the current rules of the system.

3.2 Systematic fraud can affect the political power of blocs

For candidates, the only means to generate a large number of votes is through the ability to control voting blocs, or through widescale fraud. Fraud itself is a difficult concept to define and while AREU monitors witnessed several instances of small-scale violations of electoral law, such as elders pressuring voters within a polling station, these acts appear in the provincial council results to have had little influence on the outcome. On a larger scale, what is more concerning is the systematic fraud that took place in the tallying process at polling stations and in Kabul, as described below, where results were altered from those posted at individual polling stations.[15] Small scale "corruption" did little to skew the influence of certain voting blocs, whereas this large-scale tampering with the tallying process could make a candidate with very few supporters appear significantly more powerful. This type of fraud is increasingly part of the political system in Afghanistan, to the point at which allegations of fraudulent activity become credible and potentially serve as a key political tool for most groups, whether they themselves have acted fraudulently or not. Blocs in areas that had "lost" were quick to claim that there had been large amounts of fraud in the elections and that their power had not been legitimately demonstrated in the vote count. When power is being renegotiated between key groups after an election, it is both the number of votes counted *and* the perceived amount of political power of a given group that determines the actual amount of power that other groups are willing to concede. Thus, by claiming elections were corrupt, a group with a sizeable perceived power base can argue that regardless of what the final tallies say, they should be allowed a higher amount of representation in the government.

Making charges of corruption or fraud as a means to expand perceived power and influence was evidently a strategy used by candidates and voting blocs in the 2009 elections, particularly by Karzai's opponents, as is implied by the way in which the allegations of fraud began to increase rapidly after the vote. A few days after the polls, the ECC had received only a couple of dozen reports of corruption. As it became increasing clear that Abdullah was significantly behind Karzai in official preliminary tallies, released in stages by the IEC, more and more allegations were made, with the number eventually climbing over 2,000. The volume of complaints is indicates on the one hand an admission of electoral defeat from Abdullah, but on the other hand an attempt to gain as much political leverage as possible through the suggestion that Karzai's win was illegitimate.

Similar trends were apparent in the provincial council elections. One council candidate summed up the way in which allegations of fraud were being used to benefit certain candidates by citing a local proverb: "*aob-ra gellalut kada, maai bigira,*" or, "when the water becomes muddy, the fish is caught." In Istalif, one candidate who appeared not to have secured enough votes to win a seat claimed that the police at a certain polling station had forced people to vote for his rival and that ballot boxes had been stuffed. Another candidate's supporter claimed that election monitors had taken advantage of older voters

[15] Evidence to support this has been collated by the comparison of initial results counted and displayed at the polling stations immediately after the elections with "official" statistics released by the IEC one month later.

who were either blind or illiterate. By making such statements, losing candidates were able to question the entire election process, suggesting that if only the elections had been fair, then perhaps they would have been successful. This strategy encouraged the winning candidates and government officials to continue to respect the power of a losing candidate, while simultaneously saving face for the blocs all supporting that candidate.

This process was important in areas where the local balance of power was being struggled over in the provincial council elections. If one voting group failed to elect a candidate while another succeeded, this could bring a significant shift in the perceived power of both groups. In some instances in Istalif, voters suggested that it would be better for no one to be elected than to have one group become stronger than the others. When one candidate is successful, accusations of corruption become an important means of publically undermining the newfound strength of the victorious group.

An interesting contrast to these examples is that of Dasht-i Barchi, where voters and candidates interviewed on election day and afterwards were largely adamant that no fraud had taken place. One candidate, who was not certain of his own victory, was still certain there had not been any fraud in the polls: "I did not expect [the election process] to be as good as this—it was transparent, and there wasn't any fraud. I even saw one example of the IEC preventing fraud, where one voter wanted to show another who to vote for and was stopped from doing this." There are a number of possible reasons for this. Firstly, in the presidential race, the large majority of people in the area voted either for Karzai or Bashardost. Karzai was largely expected by Dasht-i Barchi voters to win, legitimately or otherwise—and a Karzai win would be aligned with Hazara interests, generally speaking, due to the bargains he made with key Hazara leaders. There would be little point in claiming fraud allegations against Abdullah when, at least at this stage (after preliminary results had been released) he was not considered a threat. Bashardost was seen more as a protest vote and was generally not expected to win. Although he himself made a number of high profile complaints, these were not followed up by similar concerns in interviews with Dasht-i Barchi residents, indicating that it was not a political priority for them to emphasise these claims.

However, it would be misleading to conclude that all *allegations* of fraud were merely allegations, and not based on real cases of electoral misconduct. Evidence collated by AREU strongly suggests high levels of fraud in the provincial council elections, particularly in Istalif.[16] One factor indicating fraud is that initial results claimed a higher turnout rate in the provincial council election than in the presidential polls. This is surprising given that a number of respondents for this study were not planning to vote in the provincial council elections. Similarly, with the complications of the extensive provincial council ballots, it seems likely that many more voters would leave these blank. Reports from AREU monitors at local polling stations suggest that these numbers are explained by high levels of systematic fraud by certain individual candidates and those who supported them.

For example, in one polling station in Istalif questions were raised when the IEC released initial returns suggesting that 1,710 votes had been cast in the provincial council election with only 622 in the presidential election. Monitors on the day of the voting had seen nothing to support such a large discrepancy. At the station, the two main provincial council candidates from Istalif received 227 and 274. These votes were tallied by room, one of which opened late, and were evenly distributed, 71, 70, 75, 11 and 93, 93, 77, 11. However, another candidate, who was unknown in the region, received a total of 800 votes, which were distributed between rooms by exactly 200, 400 and 200. Istalifi leaders interviewed had seen the tally sheets before they were sent to Kabul, suggesting that these 800 votes must have been added later in Kabul or in transit to Kabul. A closer look at the outside candidate reveals that he also received exactly 100 votes in Tangi Maniana, exactly 200 votes in Boothak, exactly 800 divided evenly between two voting rooms in Mir Bacha Kot, and exactly 401 in batches of 100, 100, 100, 50 and 51 in Paghman. In fact, of the 2,629 votes

[16] It is more difficult to find blatant examples of corruption in results from Dasht-i Barchi, perhaps because it is closer to the centre and thus candidates thought that results would be more scrutinised. In certain cases, votes do seem slightly imbalanced, but they do not appear to have been as radically different as results from Istalif in particular have been.

that the candidate received only 129 of them did not come in suspiciously round numbers.

It remains unclear what the IEC or ECC will do with these blatant examples of fraud. While the process claims to be transparent, the results of the provincial council election were released on the web in a confusing 3,410-page document. After this release, respondents in Istalif were not even aware that it was being claimed that an outsider had commanded so many votes. As more severe allegations of fraud in the provincial council elections become public, it remains to be seen how individual communities will respond to the apparent doctoring of their votes. What remains clear, however, is that fraud has contributed particularly to the ambiguity in which current political negotiations are taking place.

3.3 The power of ambiguity

Key to politics in Afghanistan is the concept of political ambiguity, which allows greater space for negotiation. In maintaining a degree of mystery over who they voted for, political blocs and brokers can claim rewards from more than one elected official.[17]

Provincial council candidates also took advantage of this ambiguity. Although many aligned their campaigns with presidential candidates, this linkage usually took the form of subtle activities such as the strategic positioning of posters, and was never made explicit. In Dasht-i Barchi, for example, one of the (successful) provincial council candidates, Ghulum Reza Ramazanzada, was adamant that he himself was not supported by parties or presidential candidates, although it was commonly known in the area that his father had good relationships with key party leaders. This kind of noncommittal activity ensured that should their presidential candidate lose, a provincial council candidate could easily shift to the winning side. Candidate affiliation with parties has another dimension to it, above and beyond the need to remain ambiguous about allegiances: parties are viewed by many of the voting public in Afghanistan with suspicion and mistrust given their history of violent activities in wartime. Aligning oneself publically with a political party—although some candidates did do this—could be political suicide in terms of losing key voting blocs on account of this public mistrust. Thus, by making informal connections with and receiving support from parties, but not publically declaring this support, candidates could generate funding without jeopardising their perceived voter support banks.[18]

This culture of political ambiguity renders posturing particularly significant, to the extent that brokers and even voters have the opportunity to inflate the amount of power they could potentially wield. For example, in Qarabagh, despite the fact that Karzai appeared to clearly have a lead in most areas, most Abdullah supporters continued to insist that it was likely that it was Abdullah who would receive the most votes. Due to the fact that very little information is "certain" or verifiable, it was also easy for brokers to exaggerate the number of voters potentially supporting a specific candidate when bargaining with that candidate. This ties in with the actual fluidity of blocs, compared to the perception of blocs being reliable and cohesive support bases as mentioned earlier.

In Istalif, with its more fractured local power dynamics, and tensions revolving around the role of local elders and commanders in issues such as land disputes, the politics of political brokers is much more complex. Our researchers found Istalifis less willing to talk about why they were supporting certain candidates, and on more than one occasion respondents would lower their voices and make sure no one was listening before really beginning to talk. This was particularly true of younger men; in such a rural area where, as discussed above, younger men are still very dependent on kinship ties for economic and social reasons, particularly the arranging of marriages, to go against the desires of an elder could have more serious repercussions. Thus, many would proclaim outward loyalty to one candidate while quietly discussing another. Similarly, commanders continued to exert significant pressure in local politics and elders and *maliks* were also hesitant to openly declare an opinion that might go

[17] Of course, as mentioned above, this can be thwarted by the fact that there are ways for candidates to discover which groups in which locations vote for them.

[18] For more discussion of parties and the culture of political ambiguity as it plays out in parliament, see Anna Larson, *Afghanistan's New Democratic Parties: A Means to Organise Democratisation?* (Kabul: AREU, 2009).

against the wishes of a stronger figure. Even on the presidential level, one local elder claimed to have been contacted by four different presidential candidates all making promises of aid to the town in exchange for votes. Another commander in town publically supported Karzai while privately calling some of his followers and telling them not to attend any of the rallies organised by Karzai's campaign. Our researchers were told that this way, while he did not actually want Karzai to win, if Karzai did win the commander could ask the government to repay his loyalty.

Ambiguity in political dealings is not confined to elections, however, and a tendency toward shifting allegiances has been noted in many studies on Afghan politics.[19] One contemporary example of the prevalence of ambiguity is within the current parliament, where MPs do not align themselves formally with parties or political groups but instead find political expediency in keeping options open, and not narrowing key opportunities for patronage gains.[20] This has a number of effects: first, no solid blocs have formed (and nor are they likely to) in parliament over key issues, meaning that for every bill presented a new set of bargains with individuals is begun; and second, parties themselves struggle to identify which MPs they can truly count as their own representatives. This is emphasised by the SNTV voting system, which focuses on independent candidates and does not demand their affiliation to a party. This has considerable consequences for the parliamentary election in 2010, in which it is likely that candidates will again utilise this ambiguity to their advantage, to the point that it will be difficult to determine where allegiances lie. If the president decides to support some of these candidates in their campaigns, he may have to offer significant and successive incentives in order to be certain of their support once elected.

3.4 The threat of violence and opting out of the system

The threat of violence and unrest, or any type of rejection of the current system, also generates political capital for groups—particularly in a system based on ambiguity. In the context of Afghanistan, in which the state does not hold a monopoly of violence and in which violence has been used as a key political tool in recent history, the threat of an uprising can be portrayed by dissatisfied opposition candidates as very real. Indeed, if opposition players feel that their needs and interests have not been met to the standards they expected, their "wild card" is to threaten noncooperation with the electoral system and civil disruption or unrest.

This threat is particularly pertinent to the relationship between Karzai and Abdullah, as much of Karzai's legitimate capital rests in the fact that he has been able to keep a handle on ethnic tensions in Afghanistan by incorporating different ethnic leaders into his cabinet. Among Hazara voters in Dasht-i Barchi, this was one key rationale behind voting for Karzai. As one shopkeeper stated, "I voted for Karzai because I'm afraid that the security situation will become worse than now if he doesn't win." It is also clear to many Afghans that groups that vote together can potentially act violently in coordination. In threatening to jeopardise the fragile ethnic balance with violent uprisings, Abdullah could gain serious political ground by bringing uncertainty to people's views of Karzai as a master negotiator. Abdullah himself has been guarded in his own statements about the potential for violence, but some of his supporters have been more direct, creating more ambiguity about whether Abdullah and the primarily Tajik group that supports him will peacefully accept an election that they have lost.

On a provincial level such subtle threats are also common outside of Kabul city. In some instances, the threats of violence are linked to more national-level issues. One losing candidate in Istalif, who is an Abdullah supporter and claimed to have significant evidence of fraud, said that he had yet to do anything with this evidence because he was "waiting for commands from above," implying that Abdullah was deciding between a strategy of protesting the elections

[19] See for example Olivier Roy, *Afghanistan: Internal Politics and Socio-Economic Dynamics and Groupings* (Paris: CNRS/UNHCR, 2003), http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/3e9ae5535.pdf (accessed 12 October 2009); and Antonio Giustozzi and Noor Ullah, *"Tribes" and Warlords in Southern Afghanistan, 1980-2005* (London: Crisis States Research Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2006).

[20] See Larson, *Afghanistan's New Democratic Parties*.

and potentially organising some sort of uprising among the Tajiks, and that the candidate and his followers would take part in this. In a place like Qarabagh, where commanders were active participants in many campaigns, it remains to be seen how winning candidates will act toward commanders who supported opposing candidates, but from preliminary conversations it seems likely that winning candidates will negotiate with those representing losing candidates in an attempt to maintain the relative stability of the area.

Finally, there is also the very real question of whether the electoral system will continue to function at all. Some respondents believed that there was a good chance that the international community, and particularly the United States, would simply throw out the results of the election entirely and create some sort of coalition government. This, along with the protracted period following the elections, has meant that the possibility of the entire electoral process collapsing seems real to many voters. Along with vague threats of violence, this could mean that while many individuals and communities are currently participating in the electoral system, they could also potentially abandon it altogether at some point.

3.5 Voting blocs are important and will continue to be so

One of the clear questions that this report addresses is why political groupings and voter blocs continue to exert such significant power in Afghan politics. The contrasting means through which the provincial council elections played out in Dasht-i Barchi, Qarabagh and Istalif provide some tentative conclusions in this regard. In the more urban settings it seems that voting blocs and political groupings are being reshaped. Even in urban areas like Dasht-i Barchi, however, these blocs have proven incredibly adaptable. This is at least partially due to the fact that on a micro-level, political and socioeconomic concerns remain very much patronage-based, and the groups and networks that form along these patronage lines shape a significant part of everyday life, from marriages to business arrangements. It follows then that voting—essentially just another one of these activities—would occur around similar, if not the same, structures. Structures of patronage also prevail on a macro-level, in the way in which the connection between the individual and the government is not perceived as a citizen-state relationship but as one of service provider to recipient. Thus, as has been the case throughout recent history in Afghanistan, the state functions as a distributer of resources, and one which must be bargained with continually in order to secure services for any given group or community.

At the same time, it is evident that the structures of political authority in Dasht-i Barchi, Qarabagh and Istalif are highly diverse. While *shuras* of some kind exist in all areas, they perform markedly different functions and have different levels of authority. While in Qarabagh, for example, the one key *shura* is a centre for decision making and involves approximately 70 key actors in the district, the main district *shura* in Istalif is smaller and not as prominent. Instead, in Istalif, smaller family and lineage groups continue to make most key decisions, with only a few issues being discussed on the district level. In Dasht-i Barchi, the most prominent *shuras* that exist are the *shura-i qawmi*, which make decisions for their respective *qawms*, but the system of *wakhil-i gozars* for each area is also important to the way in which decisions are made in local communities. This diversity of forms of power is of particular importance when considering the ways in which existing structures of governance might merge with those newly imposed, such as the apparently forthcoming district councils.

While most voters claimed to choose their candidate based upon their hopes for development and effective government services, it is clear that most voters ultimately voted within their ethnic blocs. This discrepancy is explained by the fact that patronage networks within the government still tend to work along regional and ethnic lines. As long as voters continue to feel that they are being provided for by certain leaders, particularly those leaders with whom they share a region of origin or ethnicity, they will continue to vote within these blocs.

Interestingly, for most Afghans the prevalence of these blocs does not seriously delegitimise the electoral process; they are simply politics as usual. However, with the recent emphasis on the SNTV system, it is likely that the groups that can most effectively manipulate voting blocs within their communities will continue to be

best represented among elected officials. In the future, it is possible that if certain groups, such as the Hazara, continue to be more effective than other communities at manipulating voter blocs and securing government positions, resentment will grow, further delegitimising the government and the electoral process. As blocs continue to play a role in Afghan electoral politics, it seems possible that such groups could participate in increasingly transparent manners, functioning increasingly as groups of citizens with similar concerns and growing closer to more Western conceptions of civil society. However, it is possible that with high amounts of uncontested fraud, an increased reliance on backroom negotiations, and the perception of international and Afghan manipulation of the electoral process, these same blocs could solidify in very different ways—in the worst-case scenario contributing to a renewal of ethnic violence.

4. Conclusions and Ways Forward

4.1 Local elections matter

Despite the little interest paid to provincial council elections by some Afghan and most international actors, this study found that for many communities these elections have provided a key means in shifting the balance of power in a given area. While not all communities were able to effectively take advantage of this opportunity, the attempt to do so was widespread across all three areas studied. Provincial councils may not be particularly powerful bodies when it comes to decision-making authority and financial autonomy, but the seats on Kabul's provincial council were hotly contested across the region. This is because gaining a provincial council seat is perceived to provide key access to government services and resources that might not be allocated to the region otherwise. Furthermore, from an individual candidate's perspective, a place on the Kabul Provincial Council provides opportunities for personal gain and patronage. In places such as Istalif, where political tensions are often deliberately masked in daily life, the provincial council elections also gave political groups an arena in which to demonstrate their strength while attempting to renegotiate the distribution of influence and authority on a local level.

Fraud in provincial council elections will also perhaps end up impacting individuals much more than in the presidential elections. For the most part, despite accusations of large-scale fraud, few experts believe that any candidate could have legitimately earned more votes than Karzai. However, there are now provincial council representatives who appear to have gained their seats through systematic fraud. As groups accused of fraud and the process itself are increasingly questioned, the way that leaders respond to some of these inconsistencies could shape local politics across the country.

4.2 The elections of 2009 as a "success?"

There has been intense criticism of the August 2009 elections by international and Afghan commentators alike. But were they actually a failure? Most estimates are that around US$300 million was spent carrying out these elections in a "free and fair" manner. During campaigning and on election day, thousands of monitors came to the polls and four provincial council candidates lost their lives. Despite this, this research shows that Afghans have amalgamated existing structures of political activity with the newly-introduced SNTV system to create a hybrid, nontransparent and often fraudulent electoral system.

Yet at the same time, the primary purpose of elections is to renegotiate power between key political groups in a non-violent manner. Some power has exchanged hands in these elections, with certain winners, such as the Hazara, gaining some power in the provincial council in the study area and through presidential bargaining, and losers, most notably the Panjshiri Tajiks, losing some power in both of these areas. This transition has remained relatively free of violence thus far, particularly considering the fact that Afghanistan is still a country at war, with over 80,000 international troops currently in the country, and is experiencing the most intense fighting since the collapse of the Taliban government in 2001. During the election all major political groups engaged in the process of negotiating

the structure of the Afghan government, even if not in a typical Western way envisioned by the international community. On a local level this study demonstrates that elders, commanders, religious figures and ordinary voters in Kabul Province entered into conversations about the issues that matter most to them, particularly when discussing provincial council candidates.

4.3 An urgent need to reassess expectations and prepare for elections in 2010

It is evident that international expectations concerning the 2009 elections in Afghanistan were vastly unrealistic. Democratic institutions such as elections do not function independently from their political and cultural settings. In a context in which an ongoing insurgency meant that much of the country was seriously under-represented at the polls, and in the light of a flawed voter registration process that has been a poor substitute for a valid census, it was misguided to expect the 2009 elections to be a test of "democracy" in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the pervasion of "corrupt" practices in daily political life at a national and local level in Afghanistan makes the levels of electoral fraud unsurprising. From this factor alone it is clear that elections are a product of and inextricably linked to the society of which they are a part.

As demonstrated by this report, political power is still very much based on highly localised political groups. Therefore, the fact that most candidates did not have developed platforms and that debates between candidates were generally not substantive is also logical given that gaining votes is still primarily a question of using personal appeals and material incentives to secure voting blocs. For this reason, the few attempts that have been made by international actors to develop a political culture among candidates, for example by encouraging the formation of issues-based blocs and party platforms, have met with limited success. Similarly, initiatives to develop and encourage "civil society" in Afghanistan have had little effect, since strong tribe- and kin-based political blocs already exist, fulfilling a function very similar to that of civil society in Western societies.[21]

When thinking about the future of Afghanistan, how 2009's elections continue to play out politically, and particularly the upcoming Wolesi Jirga elections, the international community could gain much by reshaping their expectations and considering many of their goals more realistically within the Afghan context. In addition to adjusting expectations, this study suggests the following ways forward for Afghan and international actors, primarily concerning the Wolesi Jirga elections planned for 2010:

A. The Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) and the Independent Election Commission (IEC) should work together to proactively tackle fraud and voter manipulation by individuals and blocs on both a local and national level. Even though many Afghan and international actors dismiss provincial councils as relatively powerless institutions, the fact that some winning candidates gained votes through illegitimate means must be addressed publically. The perception that certain candidates and blocs were able to illegitimately use political connections to manipulate results has lowered confidence in the electoral system and increased the likelihood of violence being used as a tool to counterbalance this influence. This will be a long process, but could be successfully initiated in the run-up to the Wolesi Jirga elections.

B. Following this, the international community, IEC and ECC should proactively plan for the coming elections and future electoral cycles, *starting now*, by modifying election procedures and learning from mistakes from the 2009 elections. For 2010, the IEC should test election day procedures (such as the indelible ink used to mark voters' fingers, and the hole punches used to mark used voter registration cards) in advance of the elections themselves, so that there are fewer procedural "surprises" on election day that losing candidates can then use to delegitimise the process. Looking to the future, the chaos created by the incredibly high number of candidates could be addressed by revisiting election laws and making it more difficult for candidates to register. While election laws cannot be changed at this stage before the coming elections in 2010 (due to a constitutional provision prohibiting change

[21] See Coburn, *Potters and Warlords*.

one year before an election), there is merit in addressing this issue far in advance of the next electoral cycle. A lower number of candidates would also encourage the formation of political alliances that transcend ethnicity and locality.

C. The IEC and ECC need to track areas where candidates and particularly influential blocs were able to use fraud in 2009 and *directly address these issues* in 2010. In some cases in 2009, local leaders were able to take advantage of patronage mechanisms to alter outcomes in local polling stations. Addressing this issue means tracking polling stations that were particularly problematic, identifying the monitors at those stations, and ensuring that they are not monitors in 2010. The IEC needs to look carefully at the process for selecting and training monitors, and attempt to limit the ability of individuals and patronage networks to manipulate them. Additional monitors, both internationals and Afghans from outside the area, need to be assigned to the most problematic areas. In addition, the IEC needs to address fraud and manipulation of voter tallies *within* the IEC, emphasising its independence. Corrupt officials need to be identified publically and dismissed. The international community needs to assist the addressing of this issue and realise that this process has further delegitimised the government and the international effort in Afghanistan, and that there is the potential for real violence, particularly in communities that feel unrepresented by a corrupted electoral process. Since violence and opting out of the system are still very real political tools in Afghan electoral politics, it is essential that procedures reward those groups with the most support in a transparent way to discourage voting blocs from turning to violence.

D. These elections should not be dismissed as a disaster. Political legitimacy in Afghanistan is not a black-and-white issue, and the actions of the Afghan government and the international community between now and the elections of 2010 will continue to shape perceptions of the elections of 2009 and the government brought to power. The international community in particular needs to realise that elections always exist within their cultural and political setting. A political culture that is structured around patronage and ambiguity, and where both corruption and violence are accessible tools, is likely to have elections with many instances of various types of fraud. The relationship between potentially corrupt leaders and voters is not fixed, however. If voters are presented with transparent, fair elections, they are likely to participate. If voters feel that the elections have been corrupted by behind-the-scenes negotiations, they are more likely to turn to leaders who can provide resources, despite these leaders' tendency to exploit ethnic and other divisions, and only reward public resources to their followers. The international community and the new government need to more actively target commanders and corrupt officials in the period between now and the next elections. Instead of allowing commanders to continue to act with impunity and manipulate political blocs, the international community and new government must take a firm stand against them. The upcoming elections will be a very public and effective vehicle through which to do this and since the Wolesi Jirga is perceived as a far more influential body than the provincial councils, it is likely that a good number of commanders will restand for election. If such measures are not taken, it must be understood that elections will continue to provide an arena for the exertion and renegotiation of political capital. Commanders remain influential figures in local communities and they will continue to shape any political process in Afghanistan unless the international community increases pressure on the Afghan government to limit their power.

E. The Afghan government should also reconsider its use of the SNTV system. While this would require major changes in electoral law, the current system is clumsy and inhibits real representation in Afghanistan. As communities have learned to take advantage of the SNTV system, the communities that are best represented in the government are not necessarily the biggest. Instead, the system is currently rewarding those communities that are most adept at manipulating voting blocs and candidates to ensure that an optimal number of candidates run from their

community. If this discrepancy is not addressed eventually, it is likely that certain communities will increasingly gain a disproportionate representation in the government while other less organised communities feel further distanced from the government in general.

F. The parliamentary elections in 2010 will not be as high profile as the presidential elections in 2009, and for this reason will not be as talked about or internationally significant. However, they provide a key opportunity to make amends for some of the mistakes that were made in 2009. It is crucial that the international community, IEC and ECC pay just as much attention to the polls next year as this year, and use the coming elections as a way to demonstrate, first and foremost to the Afghan public and also to donors, that elections are important and valuable as a means to select government in Afghanistan. While they may not resemble Western elections, this is not altogether a bad thing: voting blocs will persist, but they are part and parcel of the political process in Afghanistan and need to be recognised as such by those promoting democratisation.

"Indelible ink" marks a voter's finger

AREU is an independent research organisation based in Kabul. AREU's mission is to conduct high-quality research that informs and influences policy and practice. AREU also actively promotes a culture of research and learning by strengthening analytical capacity in Afghanistan and facilitating reflection and debate. Fundamental to AREU's vision is that its work should improve Afghan lives.

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Editing and Layout: Jay Lamey **Photos:** Noah Coburn