

Discussion Paper

# Parliamentarians and Local Politics in Afghanistan Elections and Instability II



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Noah Coburn

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## Glossary

<i>faal</i>	active
<i>jerib</i>	unit of land measurement; one <i>jerib</i> is roughly equal to 1/5th hectare
<i>jihadi</i>	a person who fought during the Afghan-Soviet War
<i>Khujain</i>	provider of services for the poor
<i>malik</i>	a local community leader in a rural area who liases in a quasi-official capacity between the community and the government; in some areas, a <i>malik</i> is referred to as a <i>qaryadar</i> or <i>arbab</i>
<i>malikan</i>	a group of <i>maliks</i>
<i>Meshrano Jirga</i>	upper house of parliament
<i>pul</i>	literally means “bridge”; commonly used to describe networks or relationships
<i>qawm</i>	a complex Afghan political and social term which is often too simply translated as “tribe or “clan”; based upon the context in which it is used, it can mean an identity group rangin in scope from family to ethnicity
<i>shura</i>	a local council
<i>Wolesi Jirga</i>	lower house of parliament

## Acronyms

MP	member of parliament
NGO	non-governmental organisation
SNTV	Single Non-Transverable Vote

## Executive Summary

Growing recognition that the Afghan insurgency has learned to exploit government deficiencies has refocused attention on the importance of local governance. Despite this, the relationship between Afghan communities and their local representatives is poorly understood. Currently, provincial council members and members of the *Wolesi Jirga*, the only officials elected in sub-national elections, serve as one of the few links between local communities and the national government. As such, there is significant debate and competition within communities between various tribes, ethnic groups and blocs of voters over who their representatives should be and what role they should play. In light of the 2010 Wolesi Jirga election, this paper takes a closer look at ways in which members of parliament (MPs) fit into these political systems on a local level and questions the relationship between elections and stability in Afghanistan.

This paper is primarily an ethnographic description of parliamentary political culture at the local level in three provinces in Afghanistan. It is part of a wider research project on representative governance in Afghanistan that the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) has been conducting since 2008.<sup>1</sup> The study focuses on the districts of Ahmadaba and Gardez City in Paktia Province; the districts of Kaldar, Dihdadi and Balkh in the province of Balkh; and Qara Bagh in the province of Kabul. The role of the MPs and the competition created by elections varies significantly in each of these districts. In fact, within the three provinces there are MPs who derive most of their power from their reputations as violent leaders during the *jihad* and civil war; others who gain their support by bringing small, but effective development projects to their constituents; and still others who use large ethnic party machines to maintain their power. Political tactics vary by region, social custom and ethnicity, as well as for historical reasons, but each reflects the distinctive choices of local political actors and their vision of the future of governance in Afghanistan. In all areas studied, however, this array of political strategies has tended to increase both political tensions and instability.

In addition to demonstrating the rich variety of local political structures in Afghanistan, this paper suggests that the international community's focus on elections despite continuing instability has had some unintended consequences. On the positive side, the Wolesi Jirga election has encouraged a more public debate about serious local political issues and values, and it provides one of the few opportunities for voters to bring local issues to the national level. At the same time, in the lead-up to the election, the emphasis by the Afghan government and international community on the procedural aspects of the process, as well as the lack of a coherent vision of how to create a stable and transparent political system, were in many cases further destabilising local politics.

Recent elections in Afghanistan have created a new set of winners and losers based upon the ability to manipulate a corrupt, non-transparent system. Respondents complained less about the outcomes of elections than about the fact that elections were a part

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is part of a broader study on the parliamentary election, which has adopted two distinct but overlapping approaches. The first approach collected constituent perspectives on the parliamentary election in Kabul, Balkh and Paktia provinces and resulted in two papers: Noah Coburn, "Connecting with Kabul: The Importance of the *Wolesi Jirga* Election and Local Political Networks in Afghanistan" (Kabul: AREU, 2010) and this one. The second approach complements the first by focusing primarily on MPs' perspectives on and preparations for the 2010 election. A brief paper from this approach was produced in June 2010: M. Hassan Wafaey with Anna Larson, "The *Wolesi Jirga* in 2010: Pre-election Politics and the Appearance of Opposition" (Kabul: AREU, 2010). Another paper, also from the second research approach, followed up on themes outlined in the brief: Anna Larson, "The *Wolesi Jirga* in Flux in 2010: Elections and Instability I" (Kabul: AREU, 2010).

of political processes where they did not always know the rules, and where powerful figures could alter those rules when they desired. Due in part to this lack of predictable outcomes, elections have encouraged decision-making by political leaders that often ignores the needs of local communities and have fuelled community divisions along ethnic, class and tribal lines, without allowing equal access to political resources ideally guaranteed in competitive democracy. In fact, the case of the 2010 parliamentary election sheds doubt on the value of continuing elections in Afghanistan if significantly more is not done to ensure greater equality of access to these resources. More generally, this example demonstrates some of the issues with holding elections quickly in post-conflict situations.

The districts studied were chosen for their diversity. Ethnically, some are highly homogenous (Kaldar is primarily Turkmen and Ahmadaba is primarily Pashtun), while others are much more heterogeneous (Qara Bagh and Dihdadi both have a mixture of several ethnicities). They range from urban (Balkh) to highly rural (Kaldar), with other districts having a mixture of urban and rural characteristics (Qara Bagh and Gardez). Security was an issue in all of the districts considered, though Kaldar was fairly stable for Afghanistan in 2010; both of the districts in Paktia had serious security concerns. As this paper will explore, all of these variables combine to create highly different local political cultures, with ethnic-based political parties dominating local conversations in Balkh and tribal groups shaping most of the decision-making in Paktia.

Since early 2010, AREU governance researchers have conducted over 200 interviews in these districts with community members, elders, government officials, commanders, candidates, campaign managers and religious leaders. Respondents were male and female, young and old, and rich and poor. Interviews were primarily one-on-one, but group interviews were conducted along with approximately 20 discussion group sessions. When possible, researchers with local connections were chosen. Data has also been used from a parallel study, focusing specifically on the Wolesi Jirga, that includes over 50 interviews with various MPs.

This paper is primarily descriptive and looks at several select issues that demonstrate the link between elections and instability in local Afghan politics. It is preceded by a preliminary study of the significance of the Wolesi Jirga election for local communities and about the internal politics of the Wolesi Jirga.<sup>2</sup> AREU research teams were continuing to track candidates and voter opinions during the 2010 Wolesi Jirga campaigns, and a more thorough, analytical study of the 18 September election for the Wolesi Jirga will be released in the fall.

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2 See Coburn, "Connecting with Kabul" and Hassan Wafaey and Larson, "The *Wolesi Jirga* in 2010."



## 1. What the *Wolesi Jirga* Election Means for Local Communities

The 249 MPs from across Afghanistan come from a wide range of backgrounds, and they gain authority in very different ways ranging from violence and tribal ties to religious legitimacy and service delivery.<sup>3</sup> One key aspect of the *Wolesi Jirga* is that it gathers these figures with very different political backgrounds and means of establishing authority within one body, making it one of the few institutions in Afghanistan that truly attempts to simultaneously be local and national. Despite the role of the *Wolesi Jirga* in national issues, such as the recent rejection of some of President Hamid Karzai's nominees for ministerial posts, MPs generally need to continue working at the local level to sustain their authority, particularly as elections approach. Efforts to maintain authority can take multiple forms and do not always mean directly engaging or representing voters. Instead, many MPs use networks of local officials and community leaders to mobilise and maintain support.

Consequently, the districts studied contain a wide array of opinions about MPs, as well as MPs who establish authority in very different manners. Some derive their influence primarily from control of tribal networks, while others rely on ethnically based political parties or the delivery of resources to local communities. To maintain their positions in the 2010 election, MPs were competing with other local actors in debates over a range of political issues.<sup>4</sup> This increased tension among local political leaders and communities, and it heightened debate over the success or failure of government officials and other local leaders to deliver services and provide some form of representative governance to communities.

In order to demonstrate the range of ways that MPs fit into local political structures, how they maintain authority and provide resources, and how elections in particular have caused recent political shifts on the local level, this study focuses on three separate cases:

- The case of Paktia emphasises the ways in which various forms of political authority openly compete with each other. The section compares a former *jihadi* commander—condemned by many respondents for his violent past, but continuing to receive support due to his tribal ties and the general uncertainty about security in the province—and a female former journalist who is widely praised for her accessibility and success in bringing small-scale projects to local communities.
- Research in Balkh demonstrates how different districts can have very positive or negative opinions about representatives based upon the way in which community leaders mobilise ethnic groups and ethnic-based political parties. One of the study districts is divided between several ethnic groups, and voters generally lamented how political divides have limited their access to local power structures. In the

<sup>3</sup> MPs are elected in province-wide voting using the Single Non-transferable Vote System (SNTV), and each province is represented by between two and 33 MPs, based upon population. As a result, constituencies are province-wide, even though respondents often refer to MPs as representing a specific district. For more on the composition of the *Wolesi Jirga* see Hassan Wafaey and Larson, "The *Wolesi Jirga* in 2010." For more on the effects of the SNTV on Afghan politics, see Grant Kippen, "Elections in 2009 and 2010: Technical and Contextual Challenges to Building Democracy in Afghanistan" (Kabul: AREU, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> The number of candidates per province varies between 13 in Nimroz and 664 in Kabul. Of the 249 current MPs in 2010, only approximately 40 had chosen not to run again. For more information, see the Independent Election Commission website: [www.iec.org.af](http://www.iec.org.af).

second study district, which is poorer and more rural, respondents tended to be more positive about the ability of their leaders to address their concerns.

- In the Kabul study, instability, land and water disputes, and arguments over the distribution of international aid have created a series of constantly shifting political alliances, in contrast to some of the more stable blocs in Balkh and Paktia. These alliances often involve the local MP creating a political system that tends to be more responsive to local concerns, but is often unpredictable and generally unstable.

### **Box 1: A Barber in Mazar-i-Sharif**

*[Researcher: Who are the MPs from your area?]*

*“I don’t know how many MPs are from Mazar in the parliament and there is no organisation or body that lets people know about their MPs and their responsibilities. In general there is not a good relationship between leaders and the people, and there is lots of discrimination and inequality. For example, rich people do not have a good relationship with poor people and the government only pays attention to the rich. These are the only people that have good relations with MPs, the governor and other leaders...”*

*I, myself, was living in a house that my neighbour wanted to take from me. I received a threat from someone else that I should leave my house [or be killed]. I thought for a long time about what I should do and then called a man who is Atta’s [governor of Balkh Province] bodyguard and is one of my customers as well. He promised me that no one could evict me from my house. Then, the man who threatened me, he came with the son of Alem Khan Azadi [an MP from Mazar]. Atta’s bodyguard [his customer] was there, but didn’t say anything because they are in the same level and he favoured the powerful man over me, and I moved to another house and no one paid attention to me because I was poor...”*

*[Researcher: How were the provincial council elections in this area?]*

*“I voted for a person who is a close friend of the governor and he won the election. Before he was a provincial council member, he had bodyguards and drove nice cars and people did not have access to him. I don’t know what happened to him. I voted for him because he was my customer and I thought I would be able to have access to him in the future.”*

*[Researcher: What was his position in the past that he had bodyguards?]*

*“Because he is a jihadi commander and was very strong in the past and still had power and influence among the people. Unfortunately, whenever these people get into a good position, they forget the people. MPs, provincial council members and other leaders should be among the people, and need to be aware of the people’s problems because they won the election by the people’s vote and should raise their problems to the government...”*

*Look, now there is no rule of law and no system for controlling MPs or provincial council members who should be representing the people in parliament. Instead they are busy with their investments and collecting money and do not worry if peoples’ lives are good or bad.”*

There is no single answer to the question of what creates this great diversity of political conditions and the role of MPs in the politics of each district. Instead of providing an answer, the paper will consider a mixture of social and economic variables and histories that have created the diversity of political patterns in Afghanistan. This diversity presents several challenges to the attempts of the national government and international community to hold systematic, impartial elections. The numerous actors, and the lack of transparency in their interactions, have created a system where many leaders have an incentive to promote instability, rather than to participate in the more transparent processes intended by institutions such as elections. In many cases, the upcoming elections are actually increasing local tensions by demonstrating the ways in which the figures that are best able to manipulate a non-transparent system are more successful than those who attempt to gather more popular support.

## 2. The Role of Parliamentarians in Local Politics

Despite a range of opinions among respondents in different districts, there were certain common threads found in many discussions, particularly regarding the lack of effectiveness of MPs. The first point that the speaker raised in the case study above, regarding his uncertainty about the number and identities of the MPs representing his province, was common. This frustration about the lack of transparent governance was found among both educated and uneducated respondents. More influential local leaders, on the other hand, generally did know who their representatives were. One of the central concerns of many less influential interviewees was the fact that MPs had close relationships with these local elite, particularly district governors, elders and other powerful figures, while having fewer interactions directly with the community.

Ideally MPs were expected to be bridges between the local community and the national government (the word *pul*, or bridge, was commonly used to describe the relationship). Certain parliamentarians were praised for bringing up local security conditions in parliament. More importantly, however, voters wanted MPs to help steer development funds from the national government and international community—including both non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the international military coalition—to local communities. However, as the speaker above implied, most believed that MPs were actually using the funds to which they had access to enrich themselves and their close allies. Respondents provided numerous examples of this tendency toward self-enrichment, ranging from requiring bribes to secure government documents to steering funds toward close relatives; but in each of the districts studied the cases that seem to have caused the most local disruption tended to revolve around land grabbing, as in the case of the man above whose home was seized.

Voters looked to MPs for intercession and mediation. In some limited cases, voters might appeal to MPs to intervene on their behalf in a land dispute with a local commander. More often voters turned to MPs for help negotiating their affairs with government ministries, such as securing a passport or exemption from an exam from the Ministry of Education. Many disappointed voters, such as the barber, expressed their dismay at MPs or provincial council members who fail to provide them with certain government documents. Several respondents complained about corruption, not because they were especially opposed to corruption, but because they were upset that they had not gained access to the privileged networks of those taking advantage of corruption within the government. This was connected to the frustration many felt at their inability to access local patronage networks that included more privileged members of the community, such as *maliks*,<sup>5</sup> local officials and other community leaders. In the cases below this frustration was manifested in various ways, with voters in Paktia more likely to complain about tribal structures to which they did not have access, while voters in Balkh tended to explain this as a class difference, with the wealthy elite suppressing the poor.

The assumption that certain MPs should be assisting people in the districts they are from (or where they have kin) is demonstrated in respondents' descriptions of MPs as representatives of specific districts or communities, despite the fact they are elected in province-wide elections. This was less apparent in Kabul, where nationally known figures like Mohammad Mohaqqueq and Younis Qanooni gathered votes from many different communities in the province, and was more important in more homogenous

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5 *Maliks* are local community leaders in rural areas who liaise in a quasi-official capacity between the community and the government. In some areas a *malik* is referred to as a *qaryadar* or *arbab*, and all can have varying roles in different political contexts.

communities, such as Kaldar in Balkh. In such instances MPs were sometimes thought of as representing a certain ethnicity or political group, and respondents rarely implied that they expected these MPs to work for others in the province, even though they were technically constituents as well. This led to the fairly common lament, “We have no MP,” which generally implied only that there was no MP from that district.<sup>6</sup>

Related to this, the MPs who were most praised were often called *faal*, or active. Respondents felt that, ideally, such MPs should be “among the people.” As demonstrated in the Paktia case below, MPs who were able to help deliver or associate themselves with a large number of highly visible projects were held in much higher regard than those who might have generated fewer, but higher value projects. A remarkable number of interviewees commented on the fact that the national press had shown pictures of MPs asleep in parliament as evidence of their lack of effectiveness. This, and the fact that “they only collect their salaries,” as another respondent described their work, led to general disillusionment with many of the current MPs.

In contrast with this, particularly in less stable areas, there were MPs who were respected simply for their strength and the power they wielded. Such MPs did not always serve the interests of the people, but respondents implied that their strength ensured the area would be protected and receive consideration, particularly if security conditions deteriorated. This led to a debate about the political qualifications of MPs, with many arguing that educational background was important and others suggesting that it was more important for a political leader to demonstrate strength than benevolence.

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<sup>6</sup> For more on such perceptions, see Coburn “Connecting with Kabul” and Anna Larson, “Toward an Afghan Democracy? Exploring Perceptions of Democratization in Afghanistan” (Kabul: AREU, 2009).

### 3. Case Studies

This template of MPs as figures most often closely tied with the local elite, who should be providing resources for local communities but are more likely to be taking advantage of their status to enrich themselves and their close followers, was standard in many interviews. Despite this fairly typical pattern, the significant variations in how MPs interacted with local communities demonstrate the great diversity in local political conditions across the country. In the context of the 2010 Wolesi Jirga election, and in being asked to reflect upon past elections, respondents also demonstrated how MPs are part of an unstable political landscape and how elections represent a period of flux that can increase healthy local political discussions, but which more often contributes to instability and works to maintain a system that denies many people access to political or economic power on a local level.

The following case studies focus on specific aspects that raise some of these contrasts. None of them are meant to be a complete analysis of a district, province or representative; instead they focus on specific figures, how those figures fit into local political structures and how they affect key political issues.

#### 3.1 Paktia: The tribal leader and the journalist

The first province considered is Paktia, where researchers conducted interviews in the provincial capital of Gardez and in the more rural district of Ahmadaba. Located in the southeast of the country, about 65 miles south of Kabul, the estimated 520,000 people living in the province are primarily Pashtun, with a Tajik population in the provincial centre and only major city in the province, Gardez.<sup>7</sup> In the 2009 presidential election, 77,000 votes were cast in the province. Over 70 percent of the votes were for Karzai, and Paktia is part of the southeast region, which was widely reported to have experienced significantly more corruption than other parts of the country.<sup>8</sup> Paktia has five MPs, all of whom were standing for election again in 2010.

While many constituents in both of these areas initially dismissed MPs as ineffective and often corrupt, two distinct modes of being an MP in Paktia stood out in interviews. Both of these modes have been successful at generating local support, but they have done so in different ways. One focuses on using tribal structures to reinforce patronage ties, while the other uses service provision as a means of generating political support that crosses tribal lines. The first was more prevalent and most MPs from the province had deep tribal ties. The second, however, had generated a growing amount of support. The existence of these two ways of being a “successful” parliamentarian in Paktia demonstrates how the current security and political conditions in the area have created an unstable political system, in which various forms of political authority are in open competition with each other. As security and economic conditions continue to shift, there is no doubt that the relations between these types of authority will also change, but currently they coexist uneasily.

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<sup>7</sup> All population estimates in this paper are for 2009 and come from Afghanistan Central Statistics Organisation ([www.cso.gov.af](http://www.cso.gov.af)). Note that no formal census has been carried out in the past 30 years and that population figures are notoriously unreliable and politically charged. All current population figures from Afghanistan should therefore be treated with some scepticism.

<sup>8</sup> Thirty-seven percent of polling stations in Paktia were audited, as opposed to a nation-wide average of 15 percent. For more on fraud in the 2009 elections, see Sandra Khadhoury, “A Review of Suspected Electoral Fraud: 2009 Afghan Presidential and Provincial Council Elections,” (Democracy International, 2010).

### *MPs and politics in Paktia*

Of the three areas studied, Paktia had by far the most negative overall opinion about MPs. In general, people perceived MPs as having done little for the province and, in more extreme cases, as having used their power to confiscate land and promote their personal interests. Many complained that MPs primarily took advantage of communities to secure votes, only appearing in the province when it was necessary. This comment is an example of a typical complaint: “The other day I saw them [the MPs from Paktia] and they were opening a hospital of 100 beds. Gul Pacha, Mohamad Bidar Zazai and another provincial council representative were there. I didn’t know why they were there, and then I thought, there must be elections coming soon.”<sup>9</sup>

The one glaring exception to these criticisms of MPs is Sharifa Zourmati, a former journalist. She was mentioned in many interviews as providing several useful services and as being active within local communities; in fact, in some descriptions of provincial politics, Zourmati was not even considered an MP and seemed to be classified by respondents in a completely separate category of political leader, contrasting strongly with the overwhelming negativity about other MPs. Respondents in Paktia were, however, more positive about the elections in 2009 and the role of the national government than respondents in other provinces were. In the face of increased insecurity, most considered the presidential election of 2009 a success since it was won by Karzai, and respondents were more likely to downplay the role of fraud and corruption in 2009.<sup>10</sup>

Despite some of the respondents’ more positive opinions about elections, in general there was a perceived distance between the national government and local communities that was greater than in other study districts. Many respondents reported that *maliks* and other community leaders tended to interact with both provincial- and national-level government officials, but there was little consultation outside of this closed group of elders. Notably, the strong tribal structures in the province also made these groups of elders (often referred to by speakers simply as the *malikan*) more fixed, with less sense of the potential for youth, the educated elite or wealthy merchants to change local political structures than was apparent in other districts, particularly in Kabul.

Descriptions of MPs often emphasised the way in which MPs are embedded within these local structures, generally based upon tribe and kin. Many respondents in fact saw little distinction between MPs, other elders, commanders and the networks that they create—a trend that was common in other study districts as well. The impenetrable nature of these structures was often blamed for the failure of development aid to reach lower levels. As one woman stated, “For example, no one gets anything from donations from the Red Crescent when they come to Gardez. Instead they are divided between the MPs and the relatives of the directors of the NGOs.” This relationship, however, works both ways, since such networks demand a certain level of reciprocity. One elder explained, “MPs need the *malikan*,” before expanding on how these elders helped organise voters in exchange for both payments and promises of future assistance. These types of complaints were found in other provinces as well, but were much more common in Paktia.

<sup>9</sup> This hospital in particular was a contentious issue in the province. While some praised its opening, many claimed that the hospital had originally been designed to hold 400 beds, but due to corruption and misspent funds, in the end it was only 100 beds. Respondents typically blamed both MPs and other local leaders for this.

<sup>10</sup> As in other cases many blamed fraud primarily on the international community. For other examples, see Noah Coburn, “Losing Legitimacy? Some Afghan Views on the Government, the International Community and the 2009 Elections” (Kabul: AREU, 2009).

The struggle to access local political structures was much more difficult for women than men. While men complained that they had limited contact with local elders, who were often the political brokers that controlled access to MPs, women had an even more difficult time accessing these elders due to strict gender segregation. When asked about the relationship between local communities and MPs, one woman responded, “How should I know whether people have relationships with MPs? I don’t have any relationship with them because I am not working for the government and I am not one of their relatives.” One woman explained how the political involvement of women varied primarily from family to family: “We [women in Paktia] are encouraged by our family to vote for specific candidates, and if our family does not allow us to vote, we are not able to go and vote.” In other cases it was clear that women were being actively discouraged from participating politically. As one woman explained, “If we complain [about political issues] to anyone outside our house, we will be punished because our men feel that it is shameful for their woman to go and complain to others.”

Despite the difficulty women have participating in political debates, one should not conclude that they are completely shut out of local political issues. In fact, researchers spoke with several women with clear opinions about MP candidates who had been actively discussing them with other women in the community. Several women had been involved in campaigning within female circles for certain candidates, though several people claimed that no one in Paktia would truly allow their women to run for parliament and that all the female candidates actually came from other provinces.<sup>11</sup> That being said, it is clear that the political voice of women in Paktia was far more muted than in other provinces studied.

Security concerns added to the feeling that individuals were unable to participate actively in local or national politics. Respondents in Paktia were less willing to discuss either local- or national-level political issues. The Taliban threat to cut off the fingers of those who voted in the 2009 elections was commented on by respondents in each study district; however, it was noted more frequently and with more gravity in Paktia than in other provinces. Even in discussions with those who were willing to engage in political conversations, it was clear that they were still aware of the potential impact their words might have. As one man declared, “I am not chicken hearted; hang my words in the bazaar.” Security concerns and the strength of local political networks of elders, whose power was generally based upon tribal ties, contributed both to the feeling of distance between local communities and MPs, and the general inability of local voters to access nodes of political power. Despite this distance, it was clear that current MPs were still able to mobilise communities politically, and many were likely to be re-elected in September 2010.

### ***The tribal leader***

In this political system where local elders, *maliks* and *jihadi* commanders tend to have a large amount of political control over communities, it is unsurprising that many of the MPs from the area are similarly tribal elders with connections to local militias. Of the MPs of this type, Pacha Khan Zadran particularly stands out. From an influential family of the Zadran tribe, Pacha Khan Zadran is an important militia leader who generally opposed the Taliban. He has, however, had a shifting and problematic relationship with both the Karzai government and international forces in the area. Assigned as interim governor of Paktia after the fall of the Taliban, he failed to take office because opponents in the

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<sup>11</sup> This was difficult to verify, though in the case of Sharifa Zourmati, she clearly had personal ties in both Wardak and Kabul, as well as Paktia.



provincial centre of Gardez resisted his nomination, and as a result there was significant fighting between Zadran's allies and other groups in both Paktia and Khost. A concerted effort to bring him in on the pro-government side eventually succeeded, despite the accidental killing of one of his sons by American forces.

Further attempts have been made by the national government and the international community to integrate him with government political structures, and another of his sons was made a district governor in the province. Despite this, many respondents described him as an unpredictable and dangerous figure. As an MP, he has remained critical of the international intervention and, for example, described elections in Afghanistan as being rigged and "in foreign hands." In his own description of his work as an MP, he claims to have worked tirelessly to bring services to Paktia: "My constituents have made my house into a guesthouse. Day and night they are coming and eating lunch and dinner. They are coming from the provinces and we cannot solve their problems in parliament." This description, which highlights his ability to provide food and shelter to his constituents, is important for any influential tribal figure (though MPs with fewer tribal ties made similar claims) and was echoed in descriptions by other respondents as well.

Zadran's current position and history create a high degree of ambiguity about him among local communities. Fear of his continued military strength has meant that many respondents were quietly critical of his current and past conduct. In the AREU interviews, several issues stand out. In Paktia, where land and water are almost constant political issues, it is unsurprising that many of the concerns with Zadran are related to these two issues. One issue that respondents tended to focus on was the fact that Zadran had recently built a new road to his house. Many described how this new road went through private land, which was taken without owner consent, and how homes along its path were bulldozed.

These incidents led to a high degree of political frustration in many of the conversations about local politics. As one man described, "You can go out and observe these things right now. [Zadran] has constructed an asphalt road through the people's irrigated land... If our legislators have done this, then to whom should we complain? By God, leave them in parliament [so that they won't continue to disturb us]." Additionally, many recounted how Zadran had installed two wells in his compound that were supposed to be donated to the community.

Other respondents focused more on Zadran's history. One woman explained:

*I know just one MP from our region named Pacha Zadran. I do not accept him as a representative because I do not have good memories about him from the past. Because of him our people were filled with conflicts which caused deaths and injuries, including one of my sons. He was ten years old when he was killed in one of these fights. Still I cannot forget him. Since my son was killed, from that time I have had problems with my head—I always get headaches. I do not know who elected Pacha Khan Zadran.*

Many respondents believed that Zadran should not have had the support of communities in Paktia, but few were surprised that he won the election. As one man stated, "The campaign posters of Pacha Khan Zadran were not allowed on the walls in Gardez City and people did not want to vote for him. Despite this, he succeeded in the election." Some suggested that fraud had played a role, but other respondents described Zadran's continued strength and his ability to mobilise Zadran fighters on both the Afghan and Pakistani sides of the border as key factors in his continuing influence. Additionally, the elders and community leaders who had benefited from Zadran's political activities

were more likely to speak of him with a measured respect. More than in other districts studied, the strength of tribal ties in Paktia meant that many respondents still described how they would vote as instructed either by their kin or by tribal elders. Thus, Zadran's approach of keeping such figures close seemed to have been effective, with little to suggest this would change in the 2010 election.

Like the international military, it seems that many in the area felt it was better to have Pacha Khan Zadran as a part of the government than outside of it. Interviewees felt that, given local insecurity, having such a powerful representative in the national government could be helpful if insecurity continued to increase. This led to a situation in which many complained about Zadran, but it seemed likely that he would continue to be able to mobilise enough support, particularly among elders of the Zadran tribe, to maintain power.

### *The journalist*

In contrast with MPs in Paktia, who maintained much of their influence through military power and tribal politics, Sharifa Zourmati Wardak presents a different model of authority. Originally a journalist and married to a man from Wardak, before running for the Wolesi Jirga she spent much of her time travelling in the provinces and working for radio stations. Respondents praised Zourmati for her ability to bring projects to the area and her dedication to the concerns of the people. As one respondent commented, "*Sok ba ihsas da cha da aowkhko wakrri, sok che tol omar zharridali na we.* (A person should feel the tears of others even if he has never wept.) Sharifa Zourmati is the only MP we have seen come here several times. She grieves with those that are grieving and feels the happiness of those that are happy."

Interestingly, while respondents were often critical of MPs for not bringing major projects such as dams and roads to an area, most praised Zourmati for a series of smaller projects that she has sponsored. Many mentioned a Pashto poetry contest that she sponsored in Gardez last year, and others claimed that she had spent her personal funds on clean-up of the bazaar in Gardez. Even more than these small, carefully orchestrated and media-friendly projects, Zourmati was most praised for her availability to the community and her willingness to speak out for them. As one young man described her, "She is a real daughter of Paktia...The Khataba bomb attack is the best example. In early morning [after the bombing] she was the first who came and shared the sorrows with the family, and she got some aid from the government for the family affected." Others claim that she is the only MP from Paktia to stand in parliament and describe the security problems in the province to the government and media. These descriptions demonstrate that despite voters' complaints about services that MPs help provide, in actuality it is often not the size or dollar value of the project that shapes how it is perceived by the community.

Some might consider Zourmati simply as the democratic, pro-Western alternative to figures like Pacha Khan Zadran, but the situation is more complex than that. Zourmati herself is also fairly critical of both the presence of insurgents and international military forces in the area. She described the situation: "Because of the insecurity schools are closed, work is not done and people are not happy with the current situation. Part of the problem is the military operation of foreign troops. People are bitten by their dogs and detainees are taken to unknown locations." Note here that Zourmati's focus is not ideological, based on the dangers of Western influence or threats to Islam, as some who oppose the international presence often state. Instead she describes her concerns as

issues with insecurity as a lived experience for her constituents.<sup>12</sup> They are concerned more with the barking dogs and the sons and brothers who have been detained than with the ideology that supposedly is driving certain parts of the insurgency.

Of course, Zourmati's popularity among many communities has created some dangers as well. When asked about security, she responded:

*Actually I am not worried about myself, and I take this risk because my position is political and risk is always involved. I am really worried about my constituents, because when I go to Paktia, people come and talk to me and they depend on me to help them. But of course, while I have supporters, I have enemies as well. I am sure that someone will try to make some move against me because I regularly receive calls from the Taliban, and they are also talking with elders and mullahs to encourage them to work against women and to not vote for women.*

The growing insurgency in the area and the return of Taliban groups has altered the way respondents think about women, and politics as well. While no respondents directly stated that a Taliban presence would make them less likely to vote for a woman, it was clear at a minimum that insecurity was lowering female participation in the 2010 election and shaping how all view the link between insecurity and government.

While Sharifa Zourmati generally presents herself as having achieved popularity through her record of service provision, it is clear that she too uses networks of local elites to solidify her power. As she answered when describing her success, "When I decided I wanted to be a candidate, I had a meeting with influential community members. They helped me with my campaign. The young people and the head of my *qawm*<sup>13</sup> helped me during the elections and this is how I succeeded." While using networks similar to those of Pacha Khan Zadran and other MPs to engage with local elders and community leaders, what makes Zourmati stand apart is her ability to reach average voters below these community leaders.

Despite the many respondents praising Zourmati, respondents were not as sure she would win re-election as they were about Zadran. Her ability to mobilise some using tribal ties, and to sway voters disillusioned with other MPs with strong tribal ties, are essential for any such figure hoping for re-election. While providing services has done much to help Zourmati's reputation, interviews demonstrated that voters also tend to look to the future more than the past, and Zourmati must convince them that she will continue providing them with resources whose appeal is stronger than the threat of insecurity created by not electing tribal figures like Zadran.

### ***Elections, the threat of insecurity and political stagnation***

The frustration of many with local political conditions in Paktia comes partially from the current insecurity. At the same time, much of this frustration is the product of deep social and political structures that deny individuals access to economic and political power. Instead of weakening, these structures have in many ways strengthened due to the current insecurity. Tribal structures in Paktia are based in personal connections through kinship and shared tribal ties. When personal connections cannot be made,

<sup>12</sup> For more on various interpretations and criticisms of democracy and the international presence in Afghanistan, see Larson, "Toward an Afghan Democracy?"

<sup>13</sup> *Qawm* is a complex Afghan political and social term which is often too simply translated as "tribe" or "clan." Based upon the context in which it is used, it can mean an identity group ranging in scope from family to ethnicity.

communities feel they cannot access their MP, whether this is the fault of the MP or of their local *maliks* who use these connections exclusively for personal gain. This has created a growing frustration with the current political situation.

Due to the prevalence of patronage networks, tribal structures and insecurity, MPs and their political networks do not need to reach the average voter as regularly as they do in other case study examples. There is less need for MPs to be responsive, and voters expect less from elections in terms of access to power. Consequently, elections are treated with more indifference. Most respondents supported Hamid Karzai in the recent presidential election and, as a result, very few were concerned by the allegations of corruption and fraud, which they felt had done little to change the outcome. There was little concern about the validity of the election for the sake of the election itself.

This political system has allowed Pacha Khan Zadran to maintain power, despite the stories people tell about him seizing land and contributing to an unstable political landscape. The corollary to this, however, is that in order to get elected more independently from tribal connections, as Sharifa Zourmati has done, leaders must constantly deliver certain resources to the community. This means that under the current conditions, figures like Zourmati are likely to struggle to gain political authority, while figures like Zadran will maintain their power, unless there is intervention by the national government or the international community. The result is a general feeling that the government is unreliable and unresponsive to the needs of local communities, and, as a result, the strategy for many is to continue supporting figures with strong military backgrounds. Despite these candidates being more feared than loved, in an unstable system where outcomes are generally dictated by the strongest figures, many feel that sidelining them would lead to further insecurity and possibly renewed fighting with the government.

This situation led many respondents, when discussing corruption and the misuse of power by tribal leaders, to describe the situation as inevitable and difficult to change. (This contrasts with the case studies below, where change is constant and respondents felt they had much more influence over local structures.) When asked what communities could do about tribal figures, one man told the following story:

*One day some robbers stole money from Mullah Nasruddin.<sup>14</sup> Afterward the mullah went to sit in the graveyard. When people asked him, “Why are you sitting in the graveyard? You should be searching for the robbers who took your money,” he responded, “This is the place from which no one can escape and one day they will be brought here. So I will sit and wait for them.”*

Most respondents in Paktia felt there was little they could do other than wait for security and political conditions to change.

### **3.2 Balkh: Ethnicity and political networks**

While many of the issues raised by Balkh respondents about MPs in local politics overlapped with those from Paktia—including concerns over the failure of resource delivery and difficulty accessing MPs personally—the focus in Balkh was largely on class and ethnic divisions, which greatly shaped local perceptions. A much more ethnically diverse area, Balkh has a population of over one million, composed of a mixture of Tajiks, Pashtuns, Hazaras, Uzbeks and other smaller groups, such as Arabs and Turkmen.<sup>15</sup> Sharing a border with Uzbekistan, the province is also the central economic hub of the northern region,

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14 A common hero from Afghan parables.

15 Afghan Central Statistics Organization.

meaning there is significantly more economic diversity and trade than other provinces. The key political figure in the province, Governor Atta Mohammad Noor, has solidified his power partially through maintaining a careful balance of power between ethnic-based political parties, which are still strong in much of the province. As a result, the 11 MPs in the province tend to have close ties to both Atta and these parties.<sup>16</sup> As in Paktia, opinions about these MPs and their role in local politics were generally more negative than positive. Unlike in Paktia, there was significant variation in the responses from different districts, based upon the ethnicity and location of the respondent.

Researchers in Balkh focused especially on the fact that in two of the districts studied, Dihdadi and Kaldar, opinions of MPs varied greatly. Turkmen respondents in Kaldar were more positive and tended to have a more active relationship with one MP in particular, Ruz Gouldi. This presented a striking contrast with their Tajik and Uzbek neighbours, who tended to speak negatively about all MPs, though several specifically described the effectiveness of Ruz Gouldi in providing for his Turkmen constituents. There were several factors that appeared to account for this difference, with the most central being the degree to which local politics were shaped by ethnic identity and the extent to which patrimonial relationships bound ethnic groups together (or, in some cases, did not bind them together). Ethnic-based parties were present in the other provinces as well, but it was clear that in Balkh they did much more to shape daily political life than in either Kabul or Paktia. In the case of the Turkmen, due to their small size and relatively strong ethnic solidarity (especially in comparison with their Tajik neighbours), they were able to mobilise in order to elect two MPs to the Wolesi Jirga, and these MPs were able to deliver enough resources to keep their limited number of fairly poor constituents satisfied.

In contrast with Paktia, beyond the obvious way in which the ethnic diversity of Balkh has done much to shape local politics, people also tended to describe politics in the area as dividing rich and poor more than in other study provinces. Several respondents described how this divide was shaping political power in the lead-up to the 2010 election:

*It is clear that rich candidates will win the election because poor candidates do not have the ability to campaign among the people, and you know that election is like capitalism nowadays. Therefore the candidates who have lots of money and the one who spends lots of money, he will win the election.*

Additionally, ethnic-based parties such as Jamiat, Junbesh and Wahdat tended to dominate provincial politics, and party leaders had close ties with both Governor Atta and local elders.<sup>17</sup> As one man explained when describing why there was no MP elected to the Wolesi Jirga from Dihdadi:

*Actually there are bigger dealings going on than you or I understand, and each and everything is controlled by one person [alluding to Governor Atta]...I am sure you know him, there is no need to say his name for you. You know that he is a very clever man and he lets those who support his policies and ideologies*

<sup>16</sup> Ten of the 11 current MPs are running again for office in a field of 85 candidates. It should be noted that this ratio of candidates to seats (approximately 8 to 1) is much lower than in many other provinces (e.g. in Kabul the ratio is close to 20 to 1); this may be a result of the continued influence of political parties as an organising mechanism.

<sup>17</sup> The role of these parties locally, however, varied from district to district. For a historical overview of these parties, see Barnett Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System, Second Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). For the role of parties in the previous Wolesi Jirga election, see Andrew Wilder, "A House Divided? Analysing the 2005 Afghan Elections" (Kabul: AREU, 2005).

*go to parliament. He never lets anyone who is against him gain a position. I strongly support his ideas and think he is the reason that we have the most peaceful province in all Afghanistan because he is from this area and he knows it well...He sends warning letters to robbers and criminals because he knows who they are. Most of the people agree with him although we know that he controls everything. But because of security he brings, we like him.*

Others were far more critical of Atta's involvement in local corruption, but all acknowledged the important role he plays in politics at all levels in the province.

Despite these trends in political structures across the province, the structures led to very different political conditions, which were particularly apparent when respondents described their relationships with their local MPs. These differences have contributed to a general sense of frustration at the inequitable distribution of economic and political resources.

### ***Dihdadi***

In general, opinions of MPs in Dihdadi were more negative than in other parts of the province. As one voter described the situation, "The MPs never come to meet people. I don't know anything about them. I have only once seen an MP by the name of Mahbooba." This statement is even more revealing than it first appears since Mahbooba is not an MP, but rather a provincial council representative. An elder complained:

*What have the MPs done for the people? They only go on trips to foreign countries and received high salaries from the government. They live in large homes. We don't see them coming to our area to speak with our people and ask about our problems in order find solutions for us. We do not even see them on television because the MPs are busy with their own businesses. If you watch parliament [on television] one part of the MPs are absent and no one can make them attend.*

These complaints were typical, and it was rare to find a respondent in Dihdadi who did not describe MPs as distant figures who were often corrupt, but almost always failed to provide any meaningful services.

In Balkh Province, Dihdadi is in many ways a more demographically typical district than Kaldar, the other district on which researchers focused. Close to the provincial capital of Mazar-i-Sharif, Dihdadi contains a fair amount of ethnic diversity, with many Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras, but also smaller groups such as Arabs and Turkmen. Villages tend to be ethnically homogenous, though there is a large amount of interaction between groups both economically and socially. When speaking of past elections it was common to have a respondent state that "we" voted for a specific candidate, with this "we" implying those of the same ethnicity that lived in the area. There is also some tension between different ethnicities that respondents pointed to, using economic terms more frequently than in other areas. For example, the head of the women's *shura*<sup>18</sup> in the district explained, "Tajiks are the most powerful group in this area, because they are richer than other groups." This creates a series of competing patronage networks, and it was rare for an individual to approach a member of a different ethnicity to intercede on their behalf. In turn, leaders from each group were constantly renegotiating their positions vis-à-vis one another, often with the involvement of Atta or one of his representatives.

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18 A local council.

Many respondents suggested that ethnicity was not as important as it had been in the past, while simultaneously acknowledging that it still played a key role in local politics. Unsurprisingly, most were more willing to accuse their neighbours of discrimination than to admit to it themselves. As one particularly frank interviewee stated:

*I would be lying if I said there was no discrimination. It may not be very visible, but deeply there is discrimination. In this case we cannot blame the people because it is human nature to prefer their own interests over the interests of others. For example, I am Uzbek and I look for an Uzbek candidate first. I am sure other people are like me and are looking for their own qawm.*

Along with MPs, local elders were often criticised for not doing enough for the community. Elders themselves were candid about the importance of managing development in their list of duties. As one *qaryadar* in Dihdadi stated, “My main responsibility is coordinating and organising aid. I categorise the needs of the community.” As in Paktia, there was much frustration about the failure of these networks to reach local communities.

The vast majority of respondents in the district were unsatisfied with the aid that they had received. As one man explained:

*When flour, wheat and oil come for poor people it is not given to those that deserve it. Some of the assistance is given to poor people, but the majority of the assistance is taken by those who are distributing to the people. The people who are distributing the items are the heads of villages, maliks or the heads of shuras. These influential people then add the names of their sons, wife and relatives to the list of poor people and give items to their relatives.*

When asked in follow-up what local communities could do about such unfair distribution, the man continued, “We do nothing. Who listens to what the low people say? Those who have links with government and high levels, they can do whatever they want.”

The failure of community leaders to deliver resources has hampered, but not eliminated their ability to mobilise voters. Instead there were many accounts of elders paying individuals or families to vote for a specific candidate. In these cases candidates relied on networks of elders to deliver funds, but, in contrast with Paktia, voters themselves did not seem to follow the instructions of local leaders as systematically. Additionally, there was significant debate among respondents over the precise role of elders in mobilising voters and the degree to which voters did not cross ethnic lines. As in the above case of those describing why they voted for Sharifa Zourmati, young voters especially emphasised the fact that they wanted to vote based upon the ability of candidates to deliver services. Despite this, there was no clear consensus within the district that certain candidates were more effective at delivering services than others, and a large number of respondents described the influence of family members and local elders in determining who they would vote for and admitted to voting strictly along ethnic lines.

The failure of any MP to impact the area politically or economically meant there was also less enthusiasm for elections in the district than in almost any of the other districts considered. Several elders in a focus group discussion were particularly negative, reflecting some of the more extreme feelings about elections in Dihdadi. As one elder stated, “I have a voting card but I don’t like to vote, and why should I vote? [Previously] I only voted for lying promises!” There was also more of a sense among respondents that wealth would determine the outcome of the election and that candidates, incumbents or not, could essentially purchase the votes and influence necessary to win.

Despite this, there were more campaigns active in the area some two months before the 2010 election than in the Kaldar district, as described below. As one woman said:

*They are campaigning everywhere around here. Some are running around the city in their cars with pictures pasted on the windows and encouraging people to vote for them, but other candidates are simply gathering people in one place and telling them to vote for them.*

More than in other districts, this seemed to be a product of the fact that candidates were realising the need to connect with voters, with whom they had had limited interactions. Also, if the descriptions of respondents are accurate and there is more purchasing of votes going on in the area, this would create something of a dilemma for candidates. Purchasing of votes is not as easy an approach as it sometimes seems, since it is difficult for candidates to ensure that the votes they do purchase are actually cast for them. Similarly, it means that a wide range of candidates in the town have the potential to secure votes, since political loyalty to current MPs appears minimal. As in Paktia, there is the tendency for voters to mobilise in blocs, but the failure of leaders to provide resources means that these blocs seem far less reliable than they are in other cases. This unpredictability and the lack of transparency in the dealings of party leaders have made it difficult for groups to mobilise politically. This has led to a general disillusionment with elections, but intense campaigning by candidates contrasts strongly with the next case, Kaldar.

### ***Kaldar***

Kaldar is a rural area dominated by Turkmen. The district is relatively poor, and the economy is agriculture-based. The district does have one large town on its border, Hayratan, which is a major border-crossing with Uzbekistan on the Amu Darya. This town is a commercial hub and is composed primarily of recent immigrants to the area, most of whom are Tajiks from Balkh, Badakhshan and other northern provinces. The divide between the predominantly Tajik urban centre and the primarily Turkmen rural areas surrounding it does much to shape local politics, and the two key political figures in the area are the Tajik mayor of Hayratan and Ruz Gouldi, a Turkmen MP from the area.<sup>19</sup>

Ruz Gouldi is originally from the neighbouring district of Shortepa.<sup>20</sup> He currently has a house, however, in Hayratan, where two of his sons and his nephews live, as well as maintaining land in Shortepa. When asked where his influence came from, he pointed to the fact that he was a commander during the civil war and was closely allied with Abdul Rashid Dostum; several respondents also referred to this relationship as an important basis for his influence. Despite his position as an MP and his involvement in upcoming elections, most respondents described Ruz Gouldi primarily as the leader of the Turkmen in the area, and only secondarily as an MP. Several respondents colloquially referred to Ruz Gouldi as *Khujain*, meaning “provider of services for the poor” in Turkmen.

When asked about the role of Ruz Gouldi in the area, one Uzbek mechanic explained, “I was not aware that Ruz Gouldi is an MP. He belongs to the Turkmen people and they are very lucky that they have this kind of MP. If we [Uzbeks] had such an MP like Ruz

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<sup>19</sup> The district governor is also significant in some cases, but he is closely allied with the mayor of Hayratan. Additionally, since many of the most contentious political issues in the district are between the Tajik residents of Hayratan and neighbouring Turkmen, the mayor appears to be more deeply involved in these issues than the district governor.

<sup>20</sup> There are many parallels between Kaldar and Shortepa, which is also a primarily Turkmen district, and in some ways it is perhaps more accurate to think of them as a single Turkmen political unit; however, researchers focused most of their interviews in Kaldar.



Gouldi, no one could misuse our money like some of our elders.” Another respondent, a Tajik, stated, “No, we are not aware of any MPs in this area. We only know Ruz Gouldi and he is working just for Turkmen people. They are very lucky they have an MP like Ruz Gouldi.”

As a result of him being widely viewed primarily as the leader of the Turkmen, there was significantly less debate among Turkmen respondents about the legitimacy of Ruz Gouldi’s authority. When exploring how Ruz Gouldi acquired his influence, researchers often asked how one acquired power like that of Ruz Gouldi. Several Turkmen respondents replied simply that no one could acquire influence like Ruz Gouldi, since no one other than Ruz Gouldi could be Ruz Gouldi.<sup>21</sup>

Ruz Gouldi or a close ally, often a family member, appeared to be involved in almost all key political issues in the area. Land was of interest to many living in Kaldar, especially around Hayratan. Many respondents described how Tajiks had expanded their land-holding in the past decades, taking over areas that had previously been considered government land, particularly under the past governor. Concerned by this trend, in several instances Turkmen were working to get this land back with the help of Ruz Gouldi. For example, the mayor wanted to destroy a series of informal shops and replace them with concrete ones. Several Turkmen complained about such government interference to Ruz Gouldi (despite the fact that it was not clear how such building would adversely affect Turkmen traders), and Ruz Gouldi was able to apply enough political pressure to stop the mayor from building them.

As with other MPs who constituents praised, Ruz Gouldi was considered by many to be directly concerned with their welfare. He remained in contact with people partially through his family, and his sons and nephews are active in the area. At the same time, he has made some highly public moves which respondents praised. For example, erosion on the south side of the Amu Darya has caused a loss of land for farmers along the shore. Ruz Gouldi brought a delegation from Kabul to study the problem. Despite their inability thus far to generate a real solution for the continuing erosion, Ruz Gouldi’s ability to bring such a group clearly encouraged his constituents, and respondents pointed to it as an example of why he was a good MP.

While not all Turkmen constituents were completely happy with the services that Ruz Gouldi provided for them, even in their complaints they described a very different MP-constituent relationship than we have seen in other cases. As one man complained:

*I have a very close relationship with him [Ruz Gouldi], but he has not done anything for me. Once my wife was sick and I had no money to take her to the doctor, so I asked Ruz Gouldi to give me some money so that I could take her to the doctor. He promised to give me money later. I asked him again later, but he didn’t give me any money. Finally I took some money from some other people.*

What is interesting is not the negative attitude of the respondent toward the MP, which is similar to what has been seen in numerous other cases, but the expectation that the MP should provide a service as personal as loaning money for medical costs. In no other cases did researchers encounter respondents with such intimate expectations from their MPs; instead, in other districts, most tended to go to their local *malik* or another

<sup>21</sup> This attitude is also probably a result of the fact that Turkic tribal structures tend to be much more hierarchical than Pashtun tribal structures in Afghanistan. For more, see Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

wealthy local figure with such requests.

This example, as well as the general focus on land, is also indicative of the fact that respondents in Kaldar generally had less interest in provincial and national political issues than in Dihdadi. Respondents tended to discuss the role of Atta less often as well—not, perhaps, because his influence was less, but because Atta appeared to have carefully negotiated relationships with Ruz Gouldi, the mayor of Hayratan and the district governor. Atta seemed happy to allow Ruz Gouldi to have influence among the Turkmen, both because of their relatively limited political and economic capital and the fact that, with the mayor of Hayratan, Ruz Gouldi has managed to create a relatively stable political environment in Kaldar. Notably, political parties have a much more limited role in Kaldar than in Dihdadi, despite the importance of ethnicity in politics. Perhaps as a result of this stability, there was much less interest in the 2010 election and less public campaigning going on. The assumption of most respondents was that Ruz Gouldi would win with ease.

### ***Social structures and political solidarity in Balkh Province***

What has created this situation in Kaldar, where there is a more intimate relationship between the MP and voters? Clearly the small number and solidarity of the Turkmen in the area plays a significant role. Some interesting analysis of the conditions in Kaldar came from the frustrations of voters in Dihdadi. Those living in the wealthier, more urban district often gave backhanded compliments to those living in Kaldar. As one shopkeeper in Dihdadi stated:

Here in Dihdadi people are educated and in Kaldar people are uneducated. That is the main difference. Those in Kaldar have unity and group solidarity. They respect others very much. For example if their leaders say that milk is black, then everyone will accept this even though they know that it is white. There they agree on leadership, but in this area, people do not accept the ideas of others even if they are an elder or a respectful person...that is the reason that we have not had an MP in the parliament so far.

Another man in Dihdadi added that the Turkmen “are all like sheep and one goat can guide all of them, but in Dihdadi all the people are like goats and they are trying to find their ways themselves. It is very difficult to motivate and coordinate these types of people.”

There is also the sense from non-Turkmen that the Turkmen jealously guard their resources and access to Ruz Gouldi. As one Tajik complained about Ruz Gouldi, “It is impossible to meet him because we don’t have his phone number and only the Turkmen people have his phone number.” Another stated that Ruz Gouldi is “good for the Turkmen people, not for all people.” Some of these respondents suggested that this was not simply a difference between rural and urban, or educated and uneducated; they expressed a belief that the Turkmen are in fact extremely argumentative among themselves, but when faced with an outside threat will intentionally try to act meek and accepting.

Clearly there was a sense of the ethnic group as a coherent political unit that was stronger among the Turkmen than the Hazara, Uzbeks or Tajiks in Dihdadi. Even a young Turkmen shopkeeper, who lived in Hayratan and claimed there was a move away from consulting elders on every decision, admitted that ethnicity was still central in his decision-making process: “Now I live in the city and I look to other people to see how they are deciding [who to vote for], and then I will make my decision. But first I will look for a Turkmen candidate. If I cannot find a good Turkmen candidate, then I will vote for another candidate.”

Part of this insularity is clearly maintained through linguistic differences and the fact that many Turkmen, particularly those in rural areas, speak only Turkmen and cannot communicate easily with those Tajiks living in Hayratan. Many Turkmen also watch television stations from Uzbekistan and listen to Uzbek radio for language reasons, making them less exposed to Afghan national politics than their neighbours, who tend to watch Dari language stations from Mazar-i-Sharif and Kabul. Ruz Gouldi even suggested that perhaps linguistic differences caused confusion, and that in the last election there was unintended corruption in the area due to the fact that 80 percent of his voters do not read Dari.

Beyond language, the regulation of land use also creates several important social and political patterns that emphasise group solidarity. Reports on land use vary a great deal between these districts. In Dihdadi there are several typical systems of land rental in which a farmer provides the landowner with either one-half or two-thirds of the crop yielded, based upon whether the landowner is also providing seeds and equipment. This has in some instances been monetised, with reports of approximately 5,000 to 10,000 Afs per *jerib* for a year of use. Additionally, most respondents in Dihdadi reported that there was little difficulty selling land for cash even to outsiders, with a few respondents claiming the seller should first go to the *qaryadar* to certify that they are the owners of the land.

In contrast with this, land use in Kaldar was much more tightly regulated. As one Turkmen described, “From the outside no one came to buy our land, and we will never sell our land to them because we are all relatives living together. We feel safe this way and this is the goodness of our area. We will never allow others to enter among us.” It was less common for land to be monetised, and immediate neighbours always had the right to purchase it first; in several cases the community helped those who could not afford to purchase the land for sale. Unsurprisingly, this conservative pattern, which works to prevent the breakdown of the group, has much in common with land-use practices in rural areas of Paktia as well.<sup>22</sup>

Predictably, this approach to maintaining Turkmen control over land is paralleled by marriage practices that focus on endogamy. Based upon several reports, bride price ranged from US\$2,000 to \$6,000, and could go as high as \$12,000 in Kaldar. Given the rural nature of the area and the relatively low incomes of the Turkmen, raising this money is difficult for young men without support from their relatives (particularly their patrilineal kin who tend to support them the most). This financial dependency makes young men less likely to rebel against their elders, either on issues of marriage or on more political issues, creating more solidarity within the group. This also makes close kin marriages more likely, since it is easier to arrange a marriage with a family with whom one already has relations than with family from outside the community. Thus, it seems such trends have little to do with education, and instead it is these social and economic practices which create a reliance on close kin. Turkmen tend to lead their fellow Turkmen to act more cohesively as a political unit.

These different social patterns, which have created very different relationships between MPs and local communities in Dihdadi and Kaldar, were also likely to significantly impact the 2010 election. In all areas studied, local elders were the key political brokers who do much to encourage the mobilisation of voters. In most districts, elders described their roles in campaigning and elections in a similar way, with a focus on the need

<sup>22</sup> These practices are little changed from Louis Dupree’s outlines of land-use and ownership patterns from over 30 years ago. See Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan*, 148-53 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980).

to educate voters about which candidates would help them the most. As one elder in Dihdadi reported:

*This is really a difficult job, but I do my best. I am campaigning voluntarily [i.e. he is not receiving any payment] for Alem Khan [a 2010 candidate] and I am introducing him to the people because they don't know what was done by whom. If you ask the people, most of them will say that MPs have no achievements because they are not aware about the MPs' performances, and we cannot blame them because they are not involved. I will tell the people to vote for a person who they can have access to. People count on me, but I and my team are counting on Alem Khan and I will assure the people that he is the only one who we can make accountable.*

The ability of local elders to actually provide such transparent services and connect the people with national-level leadership, however, varies from district to district. The competitive nature of politics between various ethnic groups and political parties in Dihdadi makes such organisation difficult. In turn, this difficulty in organising politically creates a less transparent political process, in which leaders have more opportunities to act corruptly if they choose to do so. In contrast with respondents in Dihdadi, respondents in Kaldar were less convinced that the 2010 election would be determined by the wealth of the candidates and by behind-the-scenes negotiations. Instead, most seemed convinced that new candidates had little chance against Ruz Gouldi and the other incumbent MPs from the province. In Dihdadi, however, the role of political parties, the influence of Governor Atta and the ability to buy and sell votes convinced most voters that the elections were not only unfair, but were unfair in an inherently unpredictable way. Many respondents felt that the political negotiations taking place were far beyond them (this contrasts significantly with the next case). With such a lack of transparency and difficulty ascertaining who has the real power, simple acts, such as investing in a business or becoming involved with politics on a local level become almost impossible.

In comparison with Paktia, there was much less concern among voters about insecurity and the approaching elections. Instead most felt the current conditions were likely to continue. In Kaldar most felt Ruz Gouldi would continue to hold onto local political authority, and in Dihdadi there was more the sense that Atta's continued influence and financial resources would allow him and his close allies to determine the outcome of the election. Noticeably, this second scenario was far less appealing to respondents than the first. The threat in Dihdadi was not that the election would lead immediately to violence as much as continue the solidification of political systems which were unresponsive to voters. In the longer term a system that isolates local communities, giving them no real access to political power, has the potential to react in a less predictable and, perhaps, more violent manner. Perhaps more transparent elections could improve opinions on representative governance in Dihdadi, but the lack of responsive MPs or other elders, particularly in comparison with Kaldar, has created a political system that most find deeply unsatisfying. Instead of solving these issues, elections are more likely to publicly highlight the inability of individual voters to create real political change.

### **3.3 Kabul: Politics in pieces**

While Afghan local politics are notoriously factious, creating a wide array of local actors, Qara Bagh was unique among the districts studied since it had an even higher number of active political actors than other districts, as well as a high amount of low-level tension due to issues ranging from development projects to disputed land. By far the largest province population-wise, Kabul has communities from all corners of Afghanistan.

AREU's research in particular focused on Qara Bagh, a semi-rural district about 20 miles north of the city itself. This area is a part of the Shomali Plain, a large plain spreading out below the Hindu Kush mountains, composed primarily of Tajik, Pashtun and Hazara settlements. This fertile area is relatively well off, carries on an active trade with Kabul and has been influential at several key points in Afghan history.<sup>23</sup> The result is an area where politics are an incredibly important aspect of daily life and where there are very few apolitical acts.

The district of Qara Bagh is composed primarily of Pashtuns and Tajiks, with only a handful of other groups, none of which have significant political power. Unlike Balkh, however, attempting to analyse local politics by starting with ethnicity can be extremely misleading. Particularly during the presidential election of 2009, it was often assumed that Pashtuns in the area would support President Karzai and Tajiks would support challenger Abdullah Abdullah. In fact there were almost more exceptions to this generalisation than there were cases that conformed to it. Similarly, political parties are important labels in the district, but certainly do not dictate individual political choices.

As a result of the 2005 election, Qara Bagh had one candidate successfully elected to the Wolesi Jirga, Anwar Khan Oryakhel.<sup>24</sup> In comparison with the districts studied in Balkh, opinions about Anwar Khan were generally more negative than Turkmen opinions about Ruz Gouldi, but more positive than Tajik opinions about MPs in Dihdadi. In contrast with other cases studied, most people in the area tended to have a strong opinion about Anwar Khan, either positive or negative, and there was much less ambivalence than in other districts. This meant some respondents stated that "Anwar Khan is an uneducated man; he has always lived in the war fort and does not know a thing about politics or the law," while others spoke of the many ways that he had helped people in the district. This divide between those responding positively and negatively, however, had less to do with ethnicity and other forms of identification that tend to be more stable over time. Instead, opinion was based more upon how the respondent felt about a series of short-term, constantly shifting political alliances that impacted many of the key issues in the town. This in turn placed a great deal of importance on political discourse and how political issues and actors were described, and researchers gathered a surprising array of interpretations of what seemed at first glance to be fairly simple narratives. The approach of the 2010 election was only increasing the number of competing narratives that people used to describe politics in the area, and alliances appeared to be shifting even more quickly than is the norm. These shifts and the general political instability resulted in a system in which local voters were more involved than in other districts, but also a system in which many were sceptical of political leaders. This instability made it difficult for individuals to establish lasting political power and resulted in a system where individuals work to undermine each other more than to establish political capital for themselves.

### *An array of actors*

In the district of Qara Bagh, there were a noticeable number of political actors highly involved in a series of political issues that were debated publicly. The key government figures in Qara Bagh were the district governor and the police chief. Working with and often at odds with these figures, however, were numerous local elders and community

<sup>23</sup> For more on the important role that the Shomali Plain has played in Afghan national politics, see Barfield, *Afghanistan*, and Noah Coburn, *Potters and Warlords in an Afghan Bazaar: Political Mobilisation, Masterly Inactivity and Violence in Post-Taliban Afghanistan* (forthcoming).

<sup>24</sup> Kabul has 33 MPs, most of whom come from the more urban parts of the city of Kabul itself. For more on the 2005 election in the Shomali Plain, see Coburn, *Potters and Warlords*.

leaders. These leaders included *maliks*, mullahs, former *jihadi* commanders and men simply known for their intelligence or leadership skills. Many of these figures were members of the district *shura*. While many districts in the area have district councils of one form or another that meet with some regularity, the district *shura* in Qara Bagh is notable for its organisation and influence.<sup>25</sup> The body is composed of almost 100 elders and leaders who represent the various villages in the district. They meet together every Thursday in a building built especially for them within the government compound, which also houses the district governor's office and the police headquarters for the district. This location, however, does not mean that the body is particularly subservient to government officials. Instead, one researcher sat through a lengthy debate during which the police chief argued that *shura* members should not be allowed to bring arms to their meeting since it was held within the government compound, while the members argued successfully that they needed to be able to defend themselves and would not surrender their arms when entering the compound (also implying that the police were not able to defend them).

More than in other districts, this *shura* is closely linked to Anwar Khan, the MP from the district. The head of the *shura* and one of the more influential men in the district is the brother of Anwar Khan. Their father was a member of the Wolesi Jirga before the Soviet invasion, and Anwar Khan's brother was active in national politics before being shot by an unknown assassin a few years after the fall of the Taliban. The attack left him paralysed. He still chairs the weekly *shura* meeting and is one of the most politically active men in town.

Far from being unrivalled, however, Anwar Khan and his brother have numerous opponents. As his brother described it, "There are some small hands working to destroy me and my brother." The *shura* itself also should not be seen as simply an extension of Anwar Khan's power. In fact, by most accounts, the greatest rival to Anwar Khan in the 2010 Wolesi Jirga election was the deputy head of the *shura*. The deputy had been allied with Anwar Khan in the past, but broke with him for several reasons including his decision to stand in the election.

Unlike in other districts studied, these actors were all members of the *shura* and interacted with each other publicly on a regular basis. Political competition was more visible to local communities than it is elsewhere. In addition, the public nature of the *shura* and the fact that politics are discussed so regularly within the community meant that political issues were much more public than in a district like Kaldar. Such local interest in politics is healthy in many democratic systems; in Qara Bagh, particularly in the lead-up to the 2010 election, it was creating a system of shifting political alliances that contributed to instability and undermined political cooperation.

### ***An array of political issues***

Fuelling the factions within Qara Bagh were several highly contentious political issues. Many of these issues were over land and water, but they also included control of resources, in the form of development aid coming into the district, and the role of government officials and local elders in certain political issues. Distinct from other districts studied, there was little sense of political jurisdiction in the area, and almost all of the major political actors were simultaneously involved in all of the major issues in the district.

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<sup>25</sup> The *shura* in Qara Bagh was also far more influential than *shuras* in other districts studied. As we will see, it was also more representative of a diverse array of actors, whereas in Paktia the *qawmi shura* overlapped directly with networks of influential elders from the area.

Development projects were some of the most contentious issues in Qara Bagh and generated large amounts of political capital. One of the key projects has been the reconstruction of a water channel bringing water to Qara Bagh from the district of Charikar to the north. As one man reported, “Service projects have a direct influence on the elections in Qara Bagh, and bringing water is one of the biggest services that has been performed in Qara Bagh during the last eight years of Karzai’s government.” The channel had functioned before the Soviet period, but had fallen into disrepair. Restoring the channel increased the amount of irrigable land in the district, but in order to do so it was necessary to find funds to repair the channel; to negotiate with leaders in Charikar, where the water was coming from; and to negotiate a fair distribution plan for those in Qara Bagh who used the water.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this issue were the multiple competing narratives of how such issues were understood, as described by community leaders and other respondents in interviews. As one respondent stated, “Whenever a service or project comes to Qara Bagh by the NGOs or government, the political brokers use these services for the benefit of a particular candidate by creating a rumour among the people that they have brought those services to Qara Bagh.” In the case of the water channel, Anwar Khan was clearly involved in securing funds from the national government for its reconstruction, but the importance of his role was widely debated. Others described Anwar Khan’s role as marginal, and instead focused on the way in which Qara Bagh’s provincial council member had negotiated the redistribution of the water as the more important aspect of the project. A few even claimed the commission had only been formed at the district governor’s suggestion. Others, however, attempted to deemphasise the influence of all those involved. For example, the member of the *Meshrano Jirga* from Qara Bagh described the return of the water as unrelated to Anwar Khan, the provincial council member or the district governor: “The water was not brought by anyone to Qara Bagh, it came by itself. The water flow was stopped due to the shortage of water in Charikar and recently the water level increased and it came to Qara Bagh.”

A similar issue was the recent construction of a training institute for teachers in the district, which was seen as both providing an economic boost to the area and demonstrating the strength and prestige of the district. This project was much discussed, partially, it seems, because it was rumoured that the institute was originally supposed to be constructed in Kalakan, the district to the south, until several local leaders were able to lobby in Kabul to have the project shifted to Qara Bagh. How this lobbying took place, however, and who was involved in it was described differently in different interviews. Many respondents described Karzai’s chief of staff, whose family is from Qara Bagh, as the primary figure in convincing the Ministry of Education to move the project to Qara Bagh. Others claimed that it was only because Anwar Khan and his brother went to the chief of staff that the project came to Qara Bagh. Finally others, perhaps trying to discredit all involved, emphasised that a delegation of elders went to Karzai’s office to discuss this issue and it was this delegation that made the difference.

Some of these constant struggles and shifting understandings of local political issues are related to the historic divide between Pashtuns and Tajiks in the area; more important, however, is the history of groups rising and falling during civil war, the Taliban period and the period since the installation of the Karzai government. This has led to more serious debates about the political history of the area than were apparent in other areas. For example, these shifting narratives led one man to explain, “I supported the *mujahiddin*. I don’t mean the warlords, I mean the real fighters who fought for the country [as opposed to those who claim to be *mujahiddin* in order to gain political capital currently].” The respondents’ relationships with Anwar Khan also did much to shape their understanding

of recent history, with those opposing to him more likely to make statements describing Qara Bagh as having “taken steps back in the past five years” and claims that they “made a mistake in selecting Anwar Khan.”

### *Shifting politics and elections in Qara Bagh*

These changing political narratives—along with the large amounts of money pouring into the Shomali, due to its proximity to Kabul and the relative strength of the region on the national political stage—mean that even small issues can have large consequences, leading to an increase in status along with more economic resources. A missed opportunity, on the other hand, can severely limit political opportunities. In such a system there is constant competition and changing variables, meaning that political promises count for little, since it is possible that political figures could change their alliance in a matter of days. Positions are unstable and are constantly being debated and redefined by political observers in Qara Bagh. This creates a set of shifting alliances, where political loyalty changes rapidly, particularly during elections when public debate over the role of different figures increases.

For example, far from being a stable body, the district *shura* has changed drastically since the fall of the Taliban. The previous district governor opened the body up, encouraging more *maliks* to join, in what several described this as an attempt to dilute the power of current members.<sup>26</sup> More recently, the *shura* has attempted to further formalise itself. Its meetings are now closed to the public, with only the final 30 minutes reserved for hearing petitioners. Since Anwar Khan derives much of his local influence from the *shura* and his brother’s position as head, the ability of the *shura* to resolve disputes and distribute resources is a key way for him to maintain influence, especially vis-à-vis the district governor. For those looking to undermine Anwar Khan’s power, attacking the legitimacy of the *shura* is an effective approach, and supporters of Anwar Khan’s chief rival in the 2010 election called the body “illegal” during interviews (though, notably, this group continues to engage with the body and acknowledge its de facto power).

This means that issues between MPs and other candidates spill into debates within the *shura* as well. For example, the district *shura* currently has five sub-committees, set up by the head of the *shura*. Some members, however, are unsatisfied with the current structure of the committees. Another member, who was running as a candidate for the Wolesi Jirga election, staged a walkout with many of his supporters to protest the current structure. This led to something of an uproar in the *shura*, with the head calming everyone down, explaining, “These things happen as elections draw near.”

As this example demonstrates, as elections approach these shifts in alliances and ever-changing political narratives become even more public and scrutinised. In the lead-up to the 2010 election this led to some key shifts among important political figures in the district. The deputy head of the *shura* had been allied with Anwar Khan and opposed to the current provincial council member, but since breaking with Anwar Khan, the deputy altered his view of the process of bringing water into Qara Bagh, stating, “Some people claim that they have performed services [for the people of Qara Bagh], but actually none of them are involved in any of these services except [the provincial council members] who were involved in the bringing and distribution of the water.” This new alliance between the deputy head of the *shura* and the provincial council representative demonstrates the difficulty of predicting political developments in the area.

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<sup>26</sup> This is another example of the difficulty of separating various narratives about political processes in Qara Bagh, since a few respondents claimed that it was actually Anwar Khan who pushed to increase the number of *maliks* on the *shura*, not the district governor.



The deputy of the *shura* was the campaign head for Karzai, despite the fact that he is Tajik. During this period, he was still closely allied with Anwar Khan, even though most described the deputy as historically loyal to Hezb-i-Islami, while Anwar Khan is associated with Jamiat. During the provincial council election the deputy opposed the incumbent provincial council candidate, who was also associated with Jamiat and allied with Anwar Khan. In 2010, however, the provincial council member appeared to be supporting the deputy head of the *shura* instead of Anwar Khan. Rather than attempting to precisely follow these alliances, the central point here is to observe the way in which political ties can shift quickly, or at least appear to. Alliances are not based strictly on ethnicity, political party affiliation or any other single variable. Shifting narratives and rumours about new alliances mean that political motives are often disguised, and respondents regularly gave conflicting accounts of who was allied with whom and what each figure's background was.

The result for many respondents was a political system that was more transparent than Dihdadi, but was significantly less stable. Leaders worked constantly both to deliver resources and to convince followers that they were responsible for those resources. This led to a system where issues were debated in a relatively public manner, and where support for political figures could change quickly. While respondents were more positive about their system than the districts considered above, where local political networks appeared more distant and impenetrable to voters, there was still concern that elections would create more instability.

Low levels of political violence were more apparent in Qara Bagh than in Balkh, but less apparent than in Paktia, where it was difficult to distinguish violence linked with the insurgency from violence over other more local issues. The assassination attempt that left Anwar Khan's brother paralysed was said to be politically motivated, and most of the figures in the district travelled in well-armed convoys. Additionally, explosives were found near a polling station on the edge of Qara Bagh during the presidential election of 2009. This led to a series of rumours about Taliban influence in the village where the explosives were found, as well as counter-rumours that they had been placed there by leaders from another village in order to create the appearance of a Taliban presence there. The lack of stable political alliances meant there was little trust between political leaders and between these leaders and their constituents. When voters have a difficult time determining what positions their representatives will take the following day, they are much less likely to form lasting political relationships. The result is little trust in the political system and a constant series of micro-level struggles for power, which are often associated with a slight threat of violence.

For now, political debates in Qara Bagh tend to produce enough resources for local communities that respondents generally supported such a system. The shifting nature of these structures and the unpredictability of political alliances, however, do not create very predictable political processes. If the situation in the area continues to destabilise, and particularly if violence becomes more widespread, it is possible for this area to become unstable quickly due to the already high level of political tension and the inability of leaders to cooperate on important issues, such as suppressing violence. Some expressed fear that elections, which have sped up the process of formation and rearrangement of alliances, would also trigger increased tensions and potentially violence. Under such conditions, there is a fine line between healthy democratic debate and political violence.

## 4. Concluding Thoughts: MPs, Elections and Stability in Afghanistan

While the main goal of this paper was primarily descriptive, there are some clear lessons to be drawn from these case studies in relation to the second Wolesi Jirga election since the fall of the Taliban. In the rush by the Afghan government and the international community to sponsor elections, not enough attention has been paid to the ways in which elections can lead to an increase in instability and further isolate local communities from the national government. As these case studies demonstrate, elections can encourage local political debate, but they can also further entrench corrupt leaders who have significant incentives not to directly address the concerns of local populations.

For too many local communities in Afghanistan, politics is a system in which certain leaders are able to manipulate the rules and average voters have little say in how decisions are made, often complaining that these decision-making processes are deliberately masked from them. This makes even basic economic and political questions—such as, “Should I start a business if it could be confiscated by a local leader?” or “Should I complain about a local official when it could cause my family physical harm?”—incredibly difficult to answer. Elections are likely to exacerbate this situation, particularly because the international community and the Afghan government are unable to guarantee transparency and security.

The above cases demonstrate that in current Afghan politics there are multiple ways of gaining and maintaining political authority at the local level. This diversity demonstrates that elections in Afghanistan are not yet a part of a predictable, coherent national political process. In places like Paktia, instability means that these processes are currently in a great state of flux. Political and security conditions are likely to continue to shape whether we see former commanders, religious leaders or figures like Sharifa Zourmati gaining power. As long as conditions remain relatively unstable, elections are going to test not simply candidate against candidate, but entire categories of political authority, systems and beliefs. This further demonstrates the extent to which elections are not solutions in and of themselves; they are merely useful political tools that take place within specific political contexts. If political systems in an area tend to be influenced by certain commanders or political parties, it is likely that these figures will also shape the outcome of elections. With many parts of the country experiencing serious insecurity, military commanders are able to use the fear of the population to win votes and weaken candidates who are more dedicated to responding to the needs of the community.

Respondents in general, however, were not as bothered by corruption and fraud in elections as outsiders often assume.<sup>27</sup> Instead, among almost all groups interviewed, the central concern of respondents was predictable access to economic and political power. They expressed the most frustration at processes that were non-transparent and unpredictable—such as in Dihdadi, where political brokers controlled most of the political negotiations in the area, or with Pacha Khan Zadran, whose unpredictability made him a threatening political force. On the other end of the spectrum, respondents spoke positively of both Ruz Gouldi and Sharifa Zourmati, since they did provide certain services more reliably.

Similarly, patronage networks that favour local leaders were described in both positive and negative terms, depending upon the degree to which respondents felt such networks

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<sup>27</sup> For more on this, see Coburn, “Losing Legitimacy?”

linked them to political power and economic resources. So, while the tribal structures in Paktia and among the Turkmen appeared similar, respondents in Paktia were more negative because they did not see local elders as focused on their concerns; in Kaldar, in contrast, the tribal structures served as predictable networks providing access to Ruz Gouldi and other Turkmen leaders. In Qara Bagh, the constantly shifting nature of political alliances meant that leaders had to work harder to preserve the loyalty of their constituents, making these networks more responsive as well. In general, however, most respondents implied that they were less concerned with receiving direct benefits from the local political system, and more concerned with having a system that was stable, providing a systematic set of rules in which they could work to make their own political, social and economic choices.

Under such conditions, one benefit of the 2010 election was its potential role in encouraging public debate among voters, not only about individual MPs, but also about how political structures function within their communities. In many cases, however, respondents were highly sceptical about whether elections could effectively provide communities with representative governance or not. In unstable conditions, it was clear that in some of the districts studied there were few incentives for MPs or other leaders to provide communities with access to political or economic resources. In the case of Dihdadi, and for MPs relying on tribal networks in Paktia, there was little need for MPs to respond directly to constituents. Instead they could rely on networks of *maliks* and other local leaders to deliver blocs of votes, in exchange for cash or other political rewards. Respondents made clear that these elders often had some say over who would become elected and how power would be distributed, but described their own positions as having little actual political agency.

At the same time, as the cases of Sharifa Zourmati and Ruz Gouldi demonstrate, there are some leaders who are attempting to gain political authority by delivering services and resources to communities. This, however, is a difficult path to follow. Providing services and resources creates immediate benefits for the community, but it does not always create long-term political capital to the same extent as more stable, historical alliances from kinship networks, marriages and tribal affiliation.<sup>28</sup> Insecurity contributes to this difficulty, since schools can be blown up, road builders harassed by insurgents and other projects simply discredited for their association with the international community.

The contrasting styles of Pacha Khan Zadran and Sharifa Zourmati reveal several important points about political structures, instability and elections. While many praised Zourmati for her work and she appeared likely to be re-elected, her authority stems from her ability to provide services. In many ways, this is significantly more difficult to do in an unstable environment, where outside donor funding is not always predictable and often targets projects that have military significance instead of benefiting the communities. At the same time, the insecurity in the region has made Zadran's work to maintain authority much easier. The continued insurgency and lack of certainty about what the political situation in Afghanistan will look like over the next several years has led many to act conservatively and avoid upsetting figures with historical tribal power, who could potentially impact local security conditions. The failure of a figure like Sharifa Zourmati to be re-elected would publicly demonstrate the extent to which elections in Afghanistan do not provide communities with leaders who are responsive to their needs.

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<sup>28</sup> It is worthwhile to note that in addition to service provision, both Ruz Gouldi and Sharifa Zourmati also relied heavily on tribal ties to reaffirm the political networks that they were a part of.

### ***Elections and long-term stability***

In light of many respondents' frustration toward constraining political structures which inhibit their access political power, the prioritisation of the rapid holding of elections in such an unstable political environment seems, in retrospect, to be a mistake. Elections can help create stable, representative governance when they are a part of a predictable process in which the rules of the game are knowable, trusted by citizens and applied to all candidates equally. In other situations they can destabilise and further delegitimise the role of government and less formal local political structures. In a system where votes are commonly bought and sold, where insurgents can rapidly change security conditions and where political alliances shift regularly, political promises are considered useless since political conditions are unstable. Voters rarely believe the promises made by candidates and are less likely to remain loyal to a particular MP, even if that MP has proven more effective than the alternatives.

This situation makes it increasingly difficult for MPs and other political leaders to accumulate political capital, since such capital is based on a series of political promises and guarantees, which, in most of the districts studied, local communities have little faith in. Instead voters have more confidence in those political structures that have endured over the past 30 years, such as the patronage and kinship networks that link (or do not link) local communities with leaders like Ruz Gouldi and Pacha Khan Zadran. One result of a system in which it is difficult to accumulate political capital is that there are fewer consequences for MPs who choose to abuse their positions. Even if local communities disapprove of acts such as land grabbing or blatant nepotism, these figures can use funds and influence among local elders to increase votes during the election, both legally and illegally. As local political networks continue to determine the outcome of elections (at least in the eyes of respondents), such networks only further solidify their power and the fact that they have little need to consult with communities on political issues, making the promise of prosperity and stability through elections increasingly hollow to most respondents.

Following the deeply flawed elections of 2009, there was an opportunity for the Afghan government and international community to re-evaluate whether or not to hold and support parliamentary elections, which were unlikely to be free or fair.<sup>29</sup> Unfortunately, few attempts have been made to address the instability and lack of transparency of local political processes in the period since the 2009 elections, and in most of the country insecurity has increased.<sup>30</sup> National officials and members of the international community in Afghanistan continue to focus primarily on the logistics of holding elections, and have done less to explore the ways in which different districts perceive and make use of these attempts at establishing representative governance. This calls into question the entire strategy of elections in post-conflict situations, where foreign countries, the United Nations and other international bodies intervene using a template that rapidly pushes for elections, without focusing enough on establishing the political foundations for democratic institutions that would encourage substantive, representative governance.

If the international community and national government are not also committed to deep political reforms—such as addressing the role of former military commanders, guaranteeing access to political power to groups such as women and minorities, and

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29 For an in-depth assessment of some of the issues with the 2009 elections, see Scott Worden, "Afghanistan: An Election Gone Awry," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 21, No. 3, July 2010.

30 For those who argue that further delaying elections in order to reform the political system would be unconstitutional, it should be remembered that the decision to delay the elections from May to September was already technically a violation of the Afghan Constitution.

guaranteeing that internationally sponsored elections cannot be hijacked by local figures with little concern for the needs of the people—then elections can potentially do more harm than good and will not promote real representative institutions. Such reforms have not yet been prioritised in Afghanistan. Until they are, given the current instability and prevalence of corrupt leaders who have not been held accountable by the national government or the international community, elections that are seen as predetermined will continue to encourage political instability and, perhaps, violence.

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