

POLITICAL ECONOMY IN THE WOLESI JIRGA

Sources of Finance and their Impact on Representation in Afghanistan's Parliament



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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	2
2. The Costs of Being a Member of Parliament.....	3
3. Parliament and Local Patronage.....	5
4. Sources of Income Not Linked to Communities	7
5. Problems with Patronage and Representation.....	10
Recent Publications from AREU	11

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1. Introduction

Over the past few years, Afghanistan's *Wolesi Jirga* (lower house of parliament), has been the subject of increasing scrutiny. This is due both to the body's unique position within the Afghan government as a potential voice of opposition, and also the formidable amount of electoral fraud and daily corruption now associated with the body. While Afghan and international observers have lamented the increasing amount of money flowing through parliament—both in terms of expenditures on campaigns and access to licit and illicit forms of funding—little has been done to systematically map out the political economy of the *Wolesi Jirga*. AREU research on the issue suggests that the financial considerations of MPs play an important and growing role in determining how Afghanistan's parliament functions. This paper attempts to lay out a framework for understanding how the political economy of parliament is contributing to the undermining of representative governance in the country.

A team of AREU researchers have conducted a wide-ranging study of representative governance in Afghanistan since 2008, tracking candidates, voters and officials during both the presidential and provincial council elections of 2009 and the *Wolesi Jirga* election of 2010. This paper grows directly out of questions that arose for researchers about the political economy of the *Wolesi Jirga* over the course of the study. Consistent among many respondents was a sense that parliamentarians had access to increasing amounts of financial resources, shaping perceptions of both the internal dynamics of parliament, and of how MPs relate to their constituents.

This paper draws on interviews with candidates, former MPs and voters conducted during the 2009 and 2010 elections, as well as interviews from after the 2010 election that focused more specifically on some of the economic aspects of being a parliamentarian. Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter, we have not provided the names or details of respondents involved. In all cases we have also attempted to triangulate and verify information, and when we could not, we make that clear in the text below. However, while rumours and stories of corruption may be difficult to verify, these rumours still are important in and of themselves because they demonstrate how the vast majority of our respondents believe the system works.

This paper looks at four basic areas of study in the political economy of parliamentarians: the costs of being an MP, sources of income for MPs from local patronage networks, the increasing role of external actors, and some of the consequences of the current system for the future of representative governance in Afghanistan. Rather than providing answers, it aims to raise questions about the system that the researchers believe are currently being largely ignored. It suggests that on top of issues of personnel, capacity or individual instances of corruption, fraud or other misdeeds, the current political economy of parliament creates certain systemic flaws in the Afghan political system. The financial considerations involved in running and sitting as an MP are changing the priorities of Afghanistan's parliamentarians in ways that threaten to distance them from the communities they represent, stifle political organisation, and further strengthen the position of entrenched powerholders. As long as these issues remain unaddressed, they will continue to undermine representative governance in the country.

2. The Costs of Being a Member of Parliament

The costs of being a member of parliament—and in particular of campaigning for election—are high. MPs we spoke to complained of the day to day costs of maintaining an office, a guesthouse for constituents and a staff. The government and international programs support some of these costs, but certainly not all.

In addition to this, most voters, particularly community leaders, expect MPs from their areas to fulfil a series of traditional political obligations. These can include providing hospitality for constituents such as a place to stay while visiting the MP in Kabul, and in some cases providing limited funds for individual needs. While there was some variation across MPs, these costs were generally high. While MPs from more distant provinces were less likely to host constituents calling on them to make demands in person, this was often balanced out by the costs of travel and logistics. As one MP from Herat complained: “Every time we return to our province, we need 100,000 Afs (US\$2,200) for airplane tickets and bodyguards.” In general, more influential figures often kept larger staffs and shouldered increased financial burdens. MPs with fewer resources were sometimes seen to rely on a wealthier MP from their province or ethnic group to provide them with office space and a place to meet with constituents—relationships which create a clear political hierarchy among the MPs.

Beyond these basic costs, there is also still a clear expectation that MPs will provide certain services to the communities they represent, even while most communities lamented their failure to perform this role effectively. While most respondents actually had fairly limited expectations in terms of services provided by the government, there was still the expectation that MPs would link communities more effectively to patronage networks in the Afghan government or connect them with NGOs. In addition to this, some MPs acted more directly, spending their own money on small-scale projects. These tended to take place in campaign season, often involving the rebuilding or renovation of mosques. In many instances there was much debate over who had paid for what, and complaints by candidates that communities were not grateful for the services they had provided or that someone else had somehow taken credit. At a local level, the framing of such narratives of resource provision has become an important aspect of political debate.¹

In many ways, these expectations are similar to those borne by more traditional community leaders in Afghanistan. Local elders and community representatives such as *maliks*, *arbabs*, *qaraydars* and *khans*² have certain economic responsibilities, which form part of the basis for their authority and their responsibility to their *qawm*.³ They are expected to receive and feed guests, particularly on feast days, and fulfil religious obligations such as paying for a religious figure to recite the Quran at funerals and other occasions. In theory, they should also be able to mobilise the resources of the community for small-scale projects, though in practice they often end up paying some of the initial costs themselves. In most cases MPs were expected, at least ideally, to provide similar resources, situating them within complex local webs of political and economic reciprocity.

However, far beyond these basic day-to-day costs, which have parallels with other leadership positions in Afghanistan, the recent campaigns for the *Wolesi Jirga* have

1 For more on this see Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, “Undermining Representative Governance: Afghanistan’s 2010 Parliamentary Election and its Alienating Impact” (Kabul: AREU, 2011).

2 The precise definitions of these positions vary in different regions in Afghanistan, but in almost all instances these leaders are respected individuals who are sometimes also considered representatives of the community to the government.

3 *Qawm* is a unit of social and political solidarity that can be based on kinship, residence or occupation.

drastically reshaped the expenditures required of an MP. In some cases, these costs do fit into some of these existing historical models of the economy of being a local Afghan leader, such as when candidates in Balkh gave local elders honorary *chapans* (Uzbek striped jackets)—a socially recognised method for demonstrating loyalty. For the most part, however, while these traditional gifts and political rhetoric about loyalty to the community may continue to shape political relationships, the great cost of new forms of campaigning—including both legitimate advertising and less legal purchasing of loyalty—has had a substantial impact on the level of expenditures for most MPs and failed candidates.

In many cases it is difficult to distinguish between fact and fiction in accounts of the recent campaigns, and rumours of candidates spending millions on campaigns are common. Since it is also clear that many candidates did not keep precise records of expenditure, it is difficult to provide a concrete estimate on the costs of campaigning. Despite this, researchers were able to track spending in a series of areas by interviewing campaign organisers and workers, owners of printing shops that produced many of the campaign posters, restaurants that hosted campaign rallies and a series of other sources. Based on this information, it is clear that an average campaign could easily cost over \$100,000 for printing costs, advertising space, television and radio air time, campaign rallies, campaign staff and related expenses. While informants tended to emphasise how much money their opponents spent and may have exaggerated in many cases, estimates from printing shops alone could reach the \$100,000 mark, with some more extravagant candidates likely spending multiple millions. Estimated costs also varied by province. Kabul was usually cited as the most expensive place to campaign, but costs were still high in more rural areas. In Balkh, where researchers spent a good deal of time, several candidates appear to have spent several million dollars.

It was even more difficult gathering data on how candidates used funds both formally and informally to purchase votes. These costs came in at least two forms: the quasi-legitimate use of funds to purchase the support of local leaders, and the more clearly illegal bribing of election officials along with other fraudulent practices. In many cases, candidates made conspicuous gifts to the community during campaigns, such as paying to rehabilitate a mosque or build a school. Other forms of fraud were more blatant, though even in these cases the overlap with local patronage networks made situations ambiguous. For example, in one case several men arrested for possession of forged voting cards were later released after a local candidate applied pressure to the district police chief. Although no money appeared to exchange hands, it was clear that the candidate had used his influence as a local political leader to secure their release. Respondents devoted particularly intense speculation to situations where candidates were alleged to have purchased votes from corrupt officials. This was due at least in part to a lack of transparency, both in the dealings of powerholders and in the operation of the Independent Election Commission (IEC) and Electoral Complaints Commission (EEC), which allowed for both wide exaggerations and plausible deniability for all.⁴ In other cases the level of fraud was less ambiguous—some candidates complained to interviewers that they had been visited by Pakistani printers offering to sell them fake voter registration cards, which printers in Afghanistan were reportedly not skilled enough to produce.

Regardless of the actual truth of some of these rumours, it is clear that the general perception of MPs (by both voters and MPs themselves) as spending vast sums both during campaigns and on a more daily basis has reshaped how people think and speak about parliamentary politics.

4 See Coburn and Larson, “Undermining Representative Governance,” and Martine van Bijlert, “Who Controls the Vote? Afghanistan’s Evolving Elections” (Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2011).

3. Parliament and Local Patronage

In sharp contrast with these incredibly high costs, basic sources of income for parliamentarians are limited, at least on the surface. The salary for MPs is approximately US\$2,000 a month, supplemented to a degree by various Afghan and international community funds that support the work MPs are expected to perform. Most respondents explained that the government would pay for the salary of one staff member and assign three police to provide security. However, this treatment was not actually uniform in practice; several more influential MPs were provided with a detail of more than ten police officers (all paid by the Ministry of the Interior), while others were given larger administrative staffs. Similarly, while most internationally-sponsored programmes claim to provide resources evenly, some MPs were clearly more successful in securing access than others. For the most part, however, it was clear that MPs were reliant on other sources of income, such as their supporters and their own personal and family wealth, to finance a substantial portion of their costs.

As with expenses, some of the sources of income for MPs are similar to those that characterise other local political figures. While many MPs have significant personal funds—often in the form of land and businesses—they also spoke of receiving financial help for their campaigns, particularly from patrilineally related kin and family living abroad in the form of remittances. In some cases support also took the form of other resources such as free office space provided by supporters or members of their community.

These types of interaction are in many ways similar to the system of rights and obligations that characterises *qawm* or tribe membership, and were described in these terms by both MPs and voters when discussing what the ideal relationship between candidates and their constituencies should look like. In these structures, local leaders are granted certain forms of authority by the community, but this tends to be limited by the fact that most local leadership positions in Afghanistan are precarious. For example, while leadership positions may tend to be patrilineally inherited, succession still depends on whether the eldest son is perceived as worthy of the position, leading to questions about succession at several points in Afghan history.⁵ This creates a system in which even those that are expected to lead must prove their worth to communities by fulfilling certain obligations that come with their authority. In the ideal case these mechanisms force local leaders to be responsive to community needs or risk losing their political legitimacy and potentially being replaced.⁶ In the case of MPs and candidates, these forms of reciprocity are much more likely to be based on these *qawm* relationships than on ideological affiliation.

In the case of campaign supporters, however, there was a clear mix of those helping out of *qawm*-based loyalty and those involved for other reasons such as financial gain, though candidates tended not to distinguish between the two. When describing those who had helped in his campaign, one successful candidate described how he was helped voluntarily by “some mullahs who talked in the mosques and encouraged the people to favour me, as did leaders of my tribe, though I should not ignore the support of

⁵ For more on this see Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁶ This, of course, is how these political mechanisms work under ideal circumstances. However, just as external sources of patronage have undermined the responsiveness of MPs, the past decades of conflict, an influx of weapons and sources of both legitimate and illegitimate funds have drastically undermined these forms of local authority in many parts of Afghanistan.

many youths and their help.” Especially in more urban areas, some candidates appeared more likely to pay their staff (some paid staffers even mentioned considering voting for other candidates), while in more rural areas candidates sometimes had large numbers of volunteers from their *qawm* or tribe working for little or nothing. However, in many cases monetary incentives were intertwined with a sense of social obligation, often framed in terms of repaying a candidate’s hospitality. In many cases, payments appear to have been informal, with staffers taking the occasional ad-hoc handout. Some candidates candidly discussed the importance of supplying good meals for their staff, explaining how by feeding them with large lunches they could get them to work the entire day.

Notably, few people complained of MPs’ tendency to trade political favour for local support, even in cases that might be considered corrupt by western definitions such as the purchasing of support from community leaders. As long as they flowed along the predictable and transparent lines of traditional patronage networks, such practices were by and large considered a legitimate method of political organisation. In contrast with this, however, large-scale networks that connected MPs to business and national-level political leaders were far less transparent and more likely to cause voter disillusionment.

4. Sources of Income Not Linked to Communities

While local forms of patronage help bind MPs to their communities and tribal groups and make them more responsive to their constituents, it is clear that most parliamentarians have become increasingly tied to other networks linked to businesses, national-level political actors and foreign sources of funding. As they grow in significance, these threaten to undermine the relationship between these parliamentarians and the communities that they represent. This is not to argue that networks are recent innovations—jihadi leaders, for example, have long used support from abroad to build networks that function largely independent of the needs of local constituencies. However, in the opinion of most of those interviewed, the scope and scale of the influence such networks have on politics in the *Wolesi Jirga* appears to have increased dramatically in recent years. While locally-rooted sources of income such as family land, businesses or relationships based on local patronage networks remain important, there was clear evidence that financing for campaigning and sitting MPs has become more dependent upon external sources. Among the most important were Afghan businesses (in particular, merchants involved in import/export and banks), potentially lucrative access to government contracts or protection, the patronage of well-established former jihadi leaders, and funding from foreign governments.

While research for this study did not attempt to directly trace business involvement in parliamentary politics, the wide reporting by respondents of all types points to a high level of engagement, as do recent media reports on links between MPs and businesses like Kabul Bank.⁷ In some instances, the resources granted may be relatively minor. For example, it was reported that one Afghan phone company had attempted to expand its influence by granting MPs free cell phones and calling credit. As one candidate pointed out, “If you check the contact numbers of MPs over the past five years, you will see that most of them were from [one specific company] and the numbers were given free of charge... Some other MPs have influence with construction companies and their contracts, but I don’t have very clear proof of this.” This quote suggests a frustration among respondents that certain MPs had access to cash and other resources, from businesses, banks and construction companies in particular, that they exchanged for future support. The fact that many of those interviewed could see clear instances of low-level influence led most of them to believe that businesses are involved on a much deeper level, pointing to the widespread belief that MPs are increasingly dependent on these relationships as a means to finance campaigns and other costs.

Intertwined with outside business involvement are the opportunities some MPs have to further their own business interests through forging new economic and political connections. As one MP explained:

The MP who plays a good economic game will gain more because this gives them access to more government contracts. These contracts directly shaped the election and current composition of parliament because anyone who wants to improve their position must first have connections with those in power and those with money. This is why coming to parliament is a good opportunity for such people, because they are able to create monopolies on certain products

⁷ See, for example, Dexter Filkins, “The Afghan Bank Heist,” *The New Yorker*, 14 February 2011. http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2011/02/14/110214fa_fact_filkins (accessed 2 May 2011). One hundred and three former MPs were named in the list of recipients of irregular loans from Kabul Bank submitted to Parliament by the head of Afghanistan’s Central Bank on 27 April 2011. See Martine van Bijlert, “The Kabul Bank Investigations; Central Bank Gives Names and Figures,” Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2 May 2011, <http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=1663> (accessed 18 May 2011).

like oil and some other things that they then will be able to raise prices for and charge as much interest as they want.

These considerations can serve to substantially reshape the priorities of most MPs. Since the role of business transactions has become more important in terms of political financing, protecting these resources and preserving their business monopolies or corrupt networks, has become increasingly important. As one current MP succinctly put it, “Most of the MPs came to parliament for political protection, not to help people.”

In addition to businesses, a relatively small group of primarily former jihadi leaders continues to dominate politics in Kabul, and their patronage networks are often prime sources of support for potential parliamentarians. In some cases, these may be relationships established during the war against the Soviets and the ensuing civil war, which continue to shape national-level politics. However, the influence of these leaders appears to have increased over the past few years and is evolving to fit changing political conditions. For example, in 2010’s parliamentary election many of these leaders had lists of candidates whom they supported, even as they avoided the language of political parties with specific platforms. In some cases they were reported to hand out cash directly, but in other cases financing was more subtle (one leader hosted a website for candidates that he supported) or involved leaders appearing with candidates at events or on posters during campaigns.

In almost all instances there was little evidence that ideology or political party was a strong binding force. Evidence of the economic aspect of these relationships was perhaps clearest in the early months of 2011 as MPs struggled to elect a new speaker for the *Wolesi Jirga*. MPs openly stated that the going rate for a vote for the speaker of the house during this process was US\$10,000, and that this amount actually increased after no candidate secured the necessary 50 percent plus one in the first round of voting—the first of several before the crisis was eventually resolved. Several candidates spoke plainly about how this was viewed as an opportunity for MPs to recuperate some of the money that they had spent on their campaigns, and especially so for those less wealthy or well-connected: “This time this parliament mostly seems like a business arena rather than a national assembly. Already some deals were signed before the election among candidates and some big players and MPs invested lots of money to win the election. It is clear that they are now not working to help the people.”

The political networks emanating from important figures are often complex, involving multiple actors and layers of patronage or influence. In one case an informant reported that one MP, usually considered of only moderate importance, “paid one car or US\$10,000 for each vote he could convince MPs to give to [a certain more influential MP]; [this influential leader] then gave this amount back to him.” As the informant concluded, selling votes for the speaker’s position is “like an investment, and the election went exactly as was planned.” This enabled the influential MP to distance himself from the manipulation of the voting process, while providing his less influential colleague the opportunity to demonstrate his loyalty and benefit financially. Such practices are reinforcing a hierarchy in the *Wolesi Jirga* that favours certain particularly wealthy and well-connected leaders. As one MP explained: “Another issue is that MPs [who don’t have as many resources], such as houses in Kabul Province, conduct meetings in the house of [a very wealthy MP] who has a large compound with a good location and a guest house. When a minister came to the meeting and saw that the meeting was taking place in the house of the wealthy MP, he clearly felt that this was due to the influence of the rich MP, and so now the minister will favour this rich MP in the future.”

A final source of income that many informants pointed to was foreign governments with political interests in Afghanistan. Most accused countries in the region of sponsoring different candidates and trying to shape the outcome of the elections. As one failed candidate stated: “Our neighbouring countries like Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan want to make a place for themselves in Afghanistan when the Americans leave.” The country most often accused of interference was Pakistan, with Iran also accused of sponsoring Hazara candidates. These rumours were not helped by reports of members of Karzai’s staff bringing bags of cash into the country when returning from diplomatic trips, which reinforced the idea that this was simply how politics is currently done in Afghanistan.⁸ It was also common to hear accusations against Western countries, particularly the United States and Britain. In this instance, most claimed that embassies in Kabul were helping to finance the campaigns of candidates who were seen as particularly pro-Western.

In many cases these alternative sources of income were overlapping and mutually reinforcing. For example, it was widely cited that one MP from a northern province with business connections had used his position to further his own business interests and ties to foreign countries. He had reportedly secured a loan for \$45 million from the Japanese government and received a lucrative government fuel contract, while his sister had been appointed to a high-level government post. While some failed candidates in particular may have been intentionally alarmist to delegitimise the entire process, enough interviewees corroborated similar stories to suggest that the role of non-local patronage networks is becoming increasingly important, as are the amounts of money they are providing.⁹

8 Hamid Shalizi, “Karzai says his office gets ‘bags of money’ from Iran,” Reuters, 25 October 2010, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/10/25/us-afghanistan-karzai-idUSTRE69O27Z20101025> (accessed 2 May 2011).

9 It was reported that MPs received several hundred dollars to vote for specific ministerial nominees in 2009, but that payments for the speaker position were over \$10,000.

5. Problems with Patronage and Representation

The current political economy of the *Wolesi Jirga* creates serious dilemmas for all MPs. As outlined above, the cost of being an MP is high and continues to increase. MPs have a variety of sources of income available to them. Some of these, like material support from fellow *qawm* members, are likely to contribute to mechanisms that ensure that MPs remain responsive to community needs. Others, however, particularly from businesses and foreign sources, actually undermine MP responsiveness to their constituents by leading them to prioritise other political concerns over the needs of the community. As these non-local sources of income grow in importance, there is increasingly a sense that success in parliament is only achieved through certain economic and political connections.

Furthermore, the overwhelmingly economic nature of ties within the *Wolesi Jirga* and the hierarchy of national-level political leaders has undermined alternative forms of political organisation. These kinds of relationship between MPs and certain national figures in particular are important because they have helped foil attempts within the *Wolesi Jirga* to organise around certain parties or platforms that might otherwise pose a challenge to the status quo. Money may be an effective short-term mobiliser, but as long as such cash payments continue to dominate political processes—and as long as MPs feel obliged to accept such funds—there are few incentives for MPs to mobilise around the political concerns of their constituencies.

All of these factors suggest that programmes that attempt to build capacity in the *Wolesi Jirga* or promote democratisation by strengthening political parties are likely to continue to have a minimal impact as long as the economic incentives in the parliamentary political system continue to push parliamentarians away from real representative governance. For now, the basic shape of the political economy of parliament continues to undermine the future of democracy in Afghanistan.

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