

Discussion Paper

# Toward an Afghan Democracy?

## Exploring Perceptions of Democratisation in Afghanistan



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Anna Larson

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## 1. Overview

Since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 and the subsequent beginning of the Bonn Process, Afghanistan (with the input of international donors) has embarked on the technical and political process of democratisation. This has involved the (re-)establishment of a presidential system of government, a bicameral parliament, provincial councils and an electoral cycle which has seen one round of elections completed and another begun. Much emphasis has been placed by the international community in particular on the initial set-up and existence of these democratic institutions, but the question remains (especially in the aftermath of 2009 elections): Above and beyond these efforts, what are Afghan perspectives on democracy?<sup>1</sup>

“Democracy” in itself is a contentious term in Afghanistan, and has been for some time. Defined by many Afghans in the current context in terms of unlimited social freedom, due to associations of a democratic political system with Western, liberal values, it has taken on pejorative connotations that have been emphasised by the increasingly prevalent anti-Western discourse heard in the public sphere. Democracy is also widely associated with “immorality” and secularism, not only due to negative perceptions of Western social values but also as a result of the secular agenda promoted under the Soviet-backed PDPA regime in the 1980s. Contrarily, the concept of government elected by popular vote is widely welcomed, as is the prospect of “Islamic democracy” or “democracy within the framework of Islam”. These terms are defined in various ways, but clearly demonstrate the desire of many Afghans to be part of the global movement toward public participation in government.

Alongside the question of defining democracy is the issue of political representation. Significant dissatisfaction with the quality of representation (in parliament and provincial councils) exists, which is considered to be the fault of both the individuals in power and of the systems of which they are a part. For many, however, the standards used to judge representatives are related to their ability to physically and personally provide services, rather than to pressure the government into providing them. Furthermore, for the majority of respondents in this study, particularly those in rural areas, substantive representation constitutes the addressing of highly localised concerns by someone who has a thorough understanding of them—namely, a member of a given local community. “Real representation” cannot be undertaken by anyone who does not have intimate familiarity, or *ashnai*, with this community. Finally, Western perceptions of the nature of individual choice in elections come into question when, again particularly in rural areas, representation is largely viewed as a collective exercise.

This discussion paper explores different perspectives of democracy and democratisation held in three provinces of Afghanistan.<sup>2</sup> It provides a brief background to democracy as a global movement, and to its origins in Afghanistan, before focusing on two key thematic areas: definitions, perceptions and interpretations of the term “democracy”, and respondents’ current experiences of representative processes. It assesses these areas in relation to and in retrospect of the 2009 elections. The paper does not provide recommendations or prescriptive solutions as to how democratisation might be strengthened in Afghanistan, but instead intends to open the discussion on the varied meanings of—and potential future for—Afghan democracy.

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1 This question has not been explored in depth in English, although a German study was published by Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) in 2004: Werner Prohl and Felix Werdin, “Demokratie und gesellschaftlicher Wandel in Afghanistan” (“*Democracy and Social Change in Afghanistan*”), KAS: 2004.

2 Kabul, Balkh and Parwan provinces.

## 2. Methodology

Five key points to consider when reading this paper:

1. Data for this study was collected in Kabul, Balkh and Parwan provinces in rural and urban areas over six months. A total of 69 qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted, both with individuals (36) and focus groups (33, of 3-15 respondents in each), with a sample of men and women of different ethnicities and social backgrounds. Respondents interviewed included teachers, students, religious scholars, civil society representatives, traders, community leaders and political party members.
2. Due to the fact that data has only been collected in these areas, which are generally considered secure and all fall within the central and northern regions of the country, findings from this study cannot be considered representative of Afghanistan as a whole. Further research is planned in a continuation of this project in the South and East of the country.
3. The majority of interviews were conducted with respondents who had at least primary education if not more. Few respondents were illiterate, and thus a significant part of the Afghan population is not represented by this study. While the sampling design specified that an equal number of literate and illiterate respondents should be targeted, the research team were often referred by the government officials giving permission for the study to those considered most able to answer questions. This limitation will be addressed in further research on the subject. This paper nonetheless attempts to present the views of respondents interviewed as a sample of opinion in the areas in which research was conducted.
4. Interviews were conducted as informal conversations with individuals and groups, with open-ended questions that began with the subject of the last elections, so as to draw on concrete experiences initially. Leading questions were avoided. In rural areas especially, the word “democracy” was often not used directly in questions due to the nature of associations attached to it. The research team instead either waited for respondents to mention the term themselves, or probed around the issue talking about “choosing representatives” and the “system of government” instead. The ways in which the word “democracy” was used by respondents in interviews was noted.
5. Trends in perceptions of democracy are difficult to detect due to the fact that *people’s views on the subject are changeable*. This was clear in some cases when second interviews were conducted with respondents and different perspectives were related each time. The analysis in this paper is presented as an indication of *some* of the common themes found to exist among diverse and differing viewpoints.

### 3. Background

#### 3.1 Democracy as a global trend

Democracy and democratic politics have been the subject of academic enquiry since the term was first used.<sup>3</sup> While there is not space to explore the majority of this literature here, key to the clear analysis of Afghan perceptions of democracy and democratisation is a brief clarification of what the terms are used to mean in the context of this paper.

Literally “rule by the people”<sup>4</sup> and famously “government of the people, by the people, for the people,”<sup>5</sup> democracy in its most basic form denotes a political system in which citizens participate in selecting their government and hold it to account by virtue of their vote. This fundamental definition can also be expanded to include universal suffrage and so-called “free and fair” elections.<sup>6</sup> Throughout this paper, the term democracy will be used in this sense, to denote the representative democratic model of participatory politics which underlies most “established” democracies at present.

In common usage, however, “democracy” has also come to encapsulate a variety of other liberal values such as freedom of speech and freedom of religion (and by extension the separation of religion and state), property rights, rule of law, and gender equality.<sup>7</sup> These values are also often packaged into the vague category of “human rights”, which in itself is often strongly associated with democracy.<sup>8</sup> Political analyst Fareed Zakaria argues that this blurring of democratic choice of leadership with these rights or values—“constitutional liberalism”—can be misleading and value-laden, especially when it comes to distinguishing between states that are democracies and those that are not:

*If a country holds competitive, multiparty elections, we call it democratic... Of course elections must be open and fair, and this requires some protections for freedom of speech and assembly. But to go beyond this minimalist definition and label a country democratic only if it guarantees a comprehensive catalog of social, political, economic and religious rights turns the word into a badge of honor rather than a descriptive category.”<sup>9</sup>*

In a number of recent cases—such as with Hamas in Palestine in 2006—parties or leaders democratically elected into power could not be (and would not want to be) labeled “liberal”, and yet have been installed into national leadership in a legitimately democratic manner.

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3 “Democracy” was first coined around the fifth century BC to denote the political system used in a number of city-states in Greece. For an analysis of democracy’s origins in Greece see Kurt A. Raaflaub, Josiah Ober and Robert A. Wallace, *Origins of Democracy in Ancient Greece* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2007). In spite of the term being coined in Greece, roots of group decision-making and “assembly democracy” can be found up to 2000 years earlier in several parts of Asia. See John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2009).

4 From the Greek *demos*, or “people”.

5 Abraham Lincoln, “Gettysburg Address,” 1863.

6 Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,” 1997, <http://fareedzakaria.com/ARTICLES/other/democracy.html> (accessed 14 August 2008). As Paul Collier also notes, elections which are not “free and fair” do not constitute “democracy”, but remain purely elections for elections’ sake. Paul Collier, “Wars, Guns and Votes: Democracy in Dangerous Places” (London: The Bodley Head, 2009), 15.

7 Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy.”

8 Tony Evans, “If Democracy, Then Human Rights?” in *Third World Quarterly* 22, No.4 (2001): 623-642.

9 Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy,” 3.

The key issue here, as pointed out by Zakaria and others, is that while a global trend toward democracy is taking place, countries which opt to democratise can share a common appreciation for the *basic political system* that democracy offers, without necessarily the same appreciation, desire for or commitment toward the *values or rights* that “established”, “Western” or “liberal” democracies hold in high esteem. Of course, they *may* share some or all of these values, but this cannot be assumed. Furthermore, they may add values of their own (such as in Thailand, for example, with prescribed attitudes towards the monarchy<sup>10</sup>) which may or may not be determined by the party in power. This is particularly important when considering democracy in the Afghan context, in which there is a clear preference for a democratic politics that would exclude some Western, secular values—especially those of the liberal individual variety—but include those that could be defined not only as specific to Islam but also to Afghanistan, as distinct from other Muslim countries.

“Democratisation” as a term is also worth exploring briefly. In this paper it is used to signify the process begun after a given country (or its government) shifts from alternative means of governing (authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, for example) or a period of civil conflict towards a democratic politics. This often involves the establishment of democratic institutions, which include but are not limited to “free and fair elections”, a national assembly, local governance structures and other methods of linking citizens to the government, such as political parties. The existence of these institutions alone does not constitute “democratic politics”,<sup>11</sup> but the process of improving their performance is in itself a central component of democratisation.

There are flaws, however, in this definition. The first is that “democratic politics” is not a tangible end-goal in itself, given that one could question the “democraticness” of some political procedures in established democracies (corporate lobbying in the USA, for example, or the way in which in the UK and many other Western European countries the prime minister is not selected by popular vote but by party). Democracy in itself is always a process—one which is continually evolving in different ways in different contexts—rather than a fixed point to which democratising countries aspire to reach, in emulation of a Western or other model. A second flaw is that in many countries, including Afghanistan and particularly those part of Samuel Huntington’s “third wave of democratisation”,<sup>12</sup> the push to democratise often comes from outside, for example in the form of donor stipulations and financial conditions (packaged in ostensibly apolitical terminology such as “good governance”). This being the case, the process is often to a large degree determined on donor perceptions of what democracy should be. Thus the emphasis on liberal values such as good governance, gender equality and privatisation, for example, in a number of democratising states’ Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs).

In Afghanistan, donor intervention in defining democracy and the process of democratisation has been substantial, and long pre-dates the formation of its PRSP (the

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10 Thai Lèse Majeste law can allocate more than 15 years imprisonment for disrespecting the king. For a summary of recent cases see Kittipong Soonprasert and Darren Schuettler, “FACTBOX: Lèse-majeste cases in Thailand,” *Reuters*, 28 August 2009, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idUSTRE57R0MT20090828>. However, enforced reverence is not prescribed in the Constitution: <http://www.thaiembdc.org/GenInfo/monarchy/ThaiMonarchy.aspx>.

11 R. Luckham, A-M. Goetz and M. Kaldor, “Democratic Institutions and Democratic Politics,” in S. Bastian and R. Luckham, eds., *Can Democracy be Designed? The Politics of Institutional Choice in Conflict-torn Societies* (London: Zed Books, 2003).

12 Samuel Huntington, “Democracy’s Third Wave,” in Diamond and Plattner, eds. *The Global Resurgence of Democracy* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 3-25.

Afghan National Development Strategy). From the beginning of Bonn Process external input has been evident, for example in the choice of a presidential system of government, in the introduction of reserved seats for women in parliament, and—crucially—in determining which actors were deemed eligible to participate in the debates around these issues.<sup>13</sup>

It is beyond the remit of this paper to discuss the merits and shortcomings of donor conditionalities and input into processes such as these. Nevertheless, with increasingly widespread disaffection for international involvement in Afghanistan, from the perspectives of both Afghan and donor country citizens, it appears that a critical point has been reached in terms of determining where the Afghan democratisation project should go from here. The question remains: if Afghanistan's democratisation is to be truly sustainable, should not the kind of democracy envisioned for the country, along with the values it should encompass, be determined first and foremost by its own citizens?<sup>14</sup> While, as elsewhere, there is evidently no single public view of what Afghan democracy should constitute, there are certain themes that emerge in the data from this study that prompt further investigation into a few commonly-held perspectives.

### 3.2 Historical background of democratic institutions in Afghanistan<sup>15</sup>

When considering the development of democratic institutions in Afghanistan, it is first necessary to make a temporary distinction between the institutions of “modern”, representative democracy—such as universal suffrage and elected parliaments—and those of “assembly democracy”, such as selected bodies for local and national decision-making.<sup>16</sup> The latter include *jirgas*, *shuras* and *loya jirgas*, which have functioned as methods of governance in Afghanistan for a considerable length of time.<sup>17</sup> While not fully democratic in the representative sense (given that members are not elected by popular vote), they still debate and process the needs of different interest groups in a given society. Interestingly however, the distinction between these “assembly” and “representative” institutions has been blurred on a number of occasions in the last

13 Thomas Ruttig highlights the way in which the US and UN played a key role in allowing extra seats for Karzai appointees in the Emergency Loya Jirga, against the rule set by the Afghan Independent Loya Jirga Commission. Thomas Ruttig, “Islamists, Leftists and a Void in the Center: Afghanistan's Political Parties and Where They Come From (1902-2006)” (Kabul: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2006), 36, retrieved from <http://www.swp-berlin.org/en/forschungsgruppen.php?id=79&page=7&PHPSESSID=3c53935ba6d00923fff865bdeb7d3f9e> (accessed 8 August 2008).

14 This however presents a problem when values of international donors and recipient states collide, given the dual accountability that bilateral donors in particular hold toward both recipient citizens and those of their home countries. This presents a democratic paradox, where the political will of non-state actors collides with the principle of “rule by the people”. This paradox was demonstrated recently in Afghanistan over the Shia family law (see Lauren Oates, “A Closer Look: The Policy and Lawmaking Process Behind the Shia Personal Status Law” (Kabul: AREU, Forthcoming in September 2009).

15 Historical references taken from Asta Olesen, *Islam and Politics in Afghanistan* (Curzon: Surrey, 1995); Barnett R Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (second edition) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Deniz Kandiyoti, *The Politics of Gender and Reconstruction in Afghanistan* (UNRISD: Geneva, 2005), 31, retrieved from <http://www.unrisd.org> (accessed 27 December 2006); and Ruttig, “Islamists, Leftists and a Void in the Center.”

16 This distinction of terms is made by John Keane in *The Life and Death of Democracy*, but not in relation to the Afghan context. In reference to Afghanistan specifically, Louis Dupree refers to *jirgas* as “rough and ready democratic institutions.” Louis Dupree, “Afghanistan's Slow March to Democracy: Reflections on Kabul's Municipal Balloting,” American Universities Field Staff Inc., *South Asia Series 7*, No. 1 (Afghanistan) (1963): 2.

17 There is some debate as to how long these institutions have existed, but all three mentioned here have been in use throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and possibly long before. See Olesen, *Islam and Politics in Afghanistan*, and Louis Dupree, “Afghanistan's Slow March to Democracy.”

century, including during Amanullah Khan's (1919-1929) reforms in the 1920s, and also more recently with community elders for example garnering bloc votes from their communities in order to win seats in representative bodies.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the key point to emphasise here is that a baseline for some form of democratic governance, albeit not "representative" in the modern sense, existed even before the reforms of Amanullah Khan.

The roots of *representative* democratic institutions in Afghanistan, however, stem from the modernising policies of Amanullah, who commissioned the building of Darulaman palace to house his envisioned first elected parliament of Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup> Although deposed before a parliament could be established, primarily as a result of conservative backlash to his liberal reforms combined with British intervention, these reforms (which included the enactment of the first constitution and establishment of a Council of the State) paved the way for the formation of a bicameral assembly in 1932 under monarch Nader Shah.<sup>20</sup> This assembly was composed of both elected and appointed seats. During the 1930s and 1940s, political activity among elite groups became more organised, with one reformist group labeling itself as a political party.<sup>21</sup> Nader's son Zahir (who had succeeded the throne after his father's death in 1933) in 1949 agreed to open elections from which a new "liberal parliament" was formed,<sup>22</sup> open to opposition groups for the first time, under Prime Minister Shah Mahmud. This experiment in liberal politics ended after four years as a result of the government renegeing on its liberalising policies in a reaction to opposition groups having gained in size and strength.

In 1953, Daoud Khan replaced Mahmud as Prime Minister in an internal coup. In the decade that followed, while political modernisation was generally put on hold, notable gains were made in terms of socioeconomic policies and education, leading to the strengthening of the middle classes.<sup>23</sup> By 1964, it became necessary to accommodate their demands for political reform,<sup>24</sup> and at the instigation of Zahir Shah a new constitution was inaugurated, which stipulated a democratically elected parliament. Elections were held in 1965 and 1969 as part of Zahir Shah's era of "New Democracy" (1964-1973).<sup>25</sup>

In 1973, former Prime Minister Daoud orchestrated a coup, toppling the monarchy and establishing the Republic of Afghanistan in its place. Zahir Shah's 1964 constitution was abolished, and in 1976 a Loya Jirga convened to draft a new one. This comprised appointed delegates and deliberately marginalised the two factions of the PDPA. This

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18 For more on this subject see Noah Coburn and Anna Larson's forthcoming AREU post-elections analysis discussion paper (October 2009).

19 There are of course fundamental differences between efforts to modernise, and efforts to democratise politics or a political system. While this paper argues that the roots of political democratisation can be found in the political leanings of a number of modernising leaders in the twentieth century, the only real example of a push towards democratisation during this period was under Zahir Shah in 1965-73.

20 While ostensibly rejecting many of the liberal reforms made by his predecessor, Nader Shah continued the trajectory towards reform, albeit at a different pace. Oleson, *Islam and Politics in Afghanistan*, 172. Nevertheless, as Kandiyoti in *The Politics of Gender and Reconstruction in Afghanistan* points out, the compromises he made with conservative religious actors had significant detrimental effects on the previous gains made in women's rights.

21 Ruttig, "Islamists, Leftists and a Void in the Center," 4.

22 Elections were instigated by Prime Minister Shah Mahmud and led to the election of a number of urban intelligentsia, which pushed freedom of press and other forms of political liberalisation, hence the name "liberal parliament". Olesen, *Islam and Politics in Afghanistan*, 202.

23 Oleson, *Islam and Politics in Afghanistan*, 203.

24 Oleson, *Islam and Politics in Afghanistan*, 203.

25 William Maley and Fazel Haq Saikal (eds.), *Political Order in Post-Communist Afghanistan* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 1992), 15.

marginalisation, along with a growing resistance from Islamist groups that threatened to further weaken the PDPA, contributed towards the Soviet-backed PDPA overthrow of Daoud's regime<sup>26</sup> in 1978, and the ensuing invasion by the Soviets in 1979. The decade that followed under the leadership of Babrak Kamal and Najibullah respectively saw considerably little political freedom—elections that were held in 1988 were largely considered rigged<sup>27</sup>—and a general intolerance of political opposition followed. Both Khalq and Parcham factions during their successive periods in power were instrumental in enforcing this intolerance, albeit in different ways. While Najibullah resorted to the formation of a quasi-multiparty system in the late 1980s, in a late attempt to generate then much-needed popular support for the regime, it was predominantly leftist parties which were able and willing to function actively.<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, the socialist model and leftist discourse adopted by the government in this era, with its focus on equality and government service provision, is very much still reflected in public perceptions of what “democracy” should constitute (section 4.4).

The end of Najibullah's regime was followed by civil war between Mujahideen factions in the early nineties, and the subsequent onset of the Taliban. Thus, while between 1919 and 2001 a number of attempts to establish both national constitutions and some form of elections had been made, in attempts to modernise Afghan politics, they had been thwarted at various stages in their development by political uprisings, rebellions and distinctly undemocratic competition for leadership.<sup>29</sup> This was often the result of sidelined actors, violent means to combat opposition, and external intervention. Indeed, the longest consecutive period of constitutional democracy—and indeed the only period which can really be considered pro-democratic—could be stated as the eight years between 1965 and 1973. Nevertheless, a pattern emerges with the attempts of successive leaders (Amanullah, Zahir Shah, Daoud and Najibullah) to begin to modernise Afghan politics, even if their policies were not entirely democratic in nature.

The year 2001 brought about the beginning of the Bonn Process, which included the enactment of a new constitution drafted by Loya Jirga<sup>30</sup> and the outline of an electoral cycle allowing the public election of the country's president for the first time in 2004. The re-establishment of a national assembly and provincial councils followed, by public vote, in 2005. Afghanistan's new representative democracy—or at least the democratic institutions designed to facilitate its development—was formed, under the guidance of and with funding from the international community.

Discussions have been numerous concerning why, in Afghanistan's immediately post-conflict context, with a high illiteracy rate and little precedent of universal suffrage in the form of nationwide polls, elections were scheduled so quickly, and these discussions coincide with the more general debate about when and under what conditions countries are “ready” to begin the process of democratisation.<sup>31</sup> At the time, however, the opportunity to vote was welcomed by Afghans as a symbol of change—presidential elections alone drew turnouts

26 There is some debate as to which faction (Khalq or Parcham) took the lead in orchestrating this overthrow, as both had simultaneous plans to do so. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 105.

27 Ruttig, “Islamists, Leftists and a Void in the Center,” 14.

28 Ruttig, “Islamists, Leftists and a Void in the Center,” 13-14.

29 Kandiyoti, *The Politics of Gender and Reconstruction in Afghanistan*, writes on this issue in terms of successive conservative reactions to liberal reforms promoting women's rights over the last century.

30 Interestingly, this “new” constitution is similar in a number of its articles to the constitution of 1964.

31 Roland Paris, *At War's End: Building Peace After Civil Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

of approximately 80%.<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, since 2005 there has been a marked decline in popular opinions of the current system of government, and of the government itself. This paper explores the meaning of “democracy” as Afghans perceive it should be, and the current system of “democratic” representation as experienced by those interviewed.

#### **Timeline of elections in Afghanistan\***

1931: Constitution of 1931 created by Nader Shah, allowing for an elected National Council. Law passed that Loya Jirga to be convened every three years, representing all “tribes”. Women not allowed to vote due to interpretations of Sharia Law.

1932: Formation of first bicameral National Council.

1933: Nader Shah killed, succeeded by Zahir Shah.

1940s: “Young Afghans” group pushing for political reforms, including free elections to the National Council and greater parliamentary control over the government

1949: First relatively free (or “less controlled”) **elections** to the National Council under Prime Minister Shah Mahmud. “Liberal parliament” formed, in which opposition groups were allowed to function. Law of freedom of the press passed. This period referred to as an experiment in political liberalisation.

1952: Second set of **elections** under Shah Mahmud, not as open as the first as tension rises due to the strength of opposition groups and critiques of the government. Beginning of government sanctions against opposition groups.

1953: Internal coup—Daoud Khan overthrows Shah Mahmud as prime minister due to press and opposition groups becoming overly critical of the government.

1953-1963: Socioeconomic reforms and emphasis on education leading to growth of the middle classes. The year 1962 sees municipal **elections** in Kabul.

1964: New constitution formally establishes open democratic elections and a bicameral parliament, universal suffrage (women given the vote).

1965: **Elections.**

1969: **Elections.**

1973: Daoud overthrows monarchy and establishes the Republic of Afghanistan. No parliament exists until 1977. Complete intolerance of political opposition.

1977: Constitution of Daoud, combining Socialist and Islamic principles. Takes away many powers of parliament and judiciary. Afghanistan becomes one-party state.

1978: Saur Revolution, Daoud and family assassinated, PDPA takes power with Taraki as president.

1979: Soviet Invasion. Taraki assassinated, Amin becomes president for three months. Amin then assassinated by the KGB and succeeded by Babrak Karmal.

1985-86: New constitution. Name of country changed from “Democratic Republic of Afghanistan” to “Republic of Afghanistan”. Local **elections** held in a few government-controlled villages of Kabul. Karmal steps down as president, with Soviet pressure.

1987: Najibullah becomes president. Ratifies a new constitution, specifying a parliament elected by popular vote, and a president elected by parliament. Also makes provisions for local and provincial councils.

1988: **Elections** held, but only in government-controlled areas.

1992: Najibullah steps down after the collapse of the regime, civil war follows.

1996: Taliban take Kabul, killing Najibullah.

2001: Fall of the Taliban. Bonn Process begins.

2004: **First presidential elections.**

2005: **Parliamentary and provincial council elections.**

2009: **Presidential and provincial council elections.**

2010: **Parliamentary elections (forthcoming).**

\*Data from same sources as Footnote 15

<sup>32</sup> According to statistics from the International Institute for Democracy and International Assistance (IDEA) turnout was as high as 83.7%. However, due to the lack of accurate population statistics available for Afghanistan, this can only be an approximation, “Afghanistan Country View” (IDEA, 2008), [http://www.idea.int/vt/country\\_view.cfm?CountryCode=AF](http://www.idea.int/vt/country_view.cfm?CountryCode=AF) (accessed 5 August 2009).

## 4. Definitions, Perceptions and Interpretations of “Democracy” in Afghanistan

This section explores different perceptions of the meaning of democracy among Afghan respondents for this study. Four recurring themes which will be discussed in detail include democracy as freedom; Western as opposed to Islamic democracy; democracy being associated with rule of law and security; and democracy as associated with poverty reduction, economic development and equality.

### 4.1 Democracy as “freedom”

By far the most common association made by respondents of all backgrounds was that of democracy with “freedom”. As the following respondents indicate, this association was often discussed in terms of the “freedom to” participate in elections, and to choose and criticise one’s own government, alongside the concern that (other) people’s freedom to “misuse” democracy, or condone any kind of behavior in the name of democratic freedom, might result in social problems:

*Respondent 1 (in conversation with Respondent 2): I think democracy means freedom, and we need freedom during elections. Everyone should feel free to vote for the person that he or she wants.*

*Respondent 2: Yes I agree, we want democracy in Afghanistan but... [i]n some ways we don’t like democracy because we have witnessed people misusing democracy. Democracy should not be misused.<sup>33</sup>*

*I think generally people have got the wrong interpretation of democracy, for instance some people think that democracy is unlimited freedom, or doing anything you want to do, or wearing any type of clothing.<sup>34</sup>*

*Democracy is a very good value in a country. But one problem is that democracy is misused in Afghanistan... Democracy is freedom of life, expression, religion etc, but... I think it has been too early to bring democracy with all its aspects. It would have been better if freedom and democracy were brought gradually.<sup>35</sup>*

*In the rural parts of the country the people are sensitive to the word democracy. And for them, this word means any unlimited freedom. Now the word “democracy” is also a kind of joke between young people. If they violate any law or do something wrong, they use this term and say, “ok, it doesn’t matter, this is a democracy”... Among the youth in the cities, the word “democracy” means having a good life and watching television.<sup>36</sup>*

These statements indicate that the freedom to participate in elections is valued, but that in the form of “democracy” it comes with the considerable risk of “excess” individual freedom. Interesting here is the tendency among respondents to express concern that other (or in some cases, the majority of) Afghans do not fully understand the concept of democracy, and further do not have the ability or will to limit their own freedom within the confines of what is socially acceptable. In many conversations, respondents specifically referred to those living in rural areas or young people as those most likely to “misuse

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33 Two female teachers, rural Balkh Province (focus group discussion).

34 Young male government employee, urban Parwan Province.

35 Young male NGO employee, urban Kabul Province.

36 Male civil society representative, urban Balkh Province.

democracy”.<sup>37</sup> The principal reason given for this was a perceived lack of awareness or education, leading to a situation in which people look to leaders for guidance and are easily manipulated. This attitude toward the rural population is not uncommon among the urban, educated elite<sup>38</sup> and a relative reluctance to take youth activities seriously is also frequently encountered in various aspects of Afghan society. Nevertheless, the frequency with which this point is made in (particularly urban) interview transcripts demonstrates a significant concern about a general lack of awareness of democracy in a country where a large proportion of the population is under 25, and where the majority of people live in rural areas.<sup>39</sup>

Stemming from this is the widely held opinion among respondents that there should be some form of nationally-implemented social controls in place to restrict the unlimited individual freedom that democracy might mean to certain groups of people. As one respondent explained,

*People say “do whatever you want, because there is democracy.” It is the responsibility of the government to define democracy and freedom for the people. There should be some limitations when you are free.*<sup>40</sup>

By extension, the vast majority of respondents suggested that the implementation of these controls would be possible if the political system were combined with Islamic principles:

*We accept democracy but we want an Islamic democracy, we don’t want a democracy in which there is anarchy, and there is no respect for teachers and elders.*<sup>41</sup>

*People are uneducated and don’t know about freedom and democracy, people are misusing this freedom. For example, mobiles are misused by the younger generation and used for illegal activities like contact between girls and boys and watching porn movies. There should be a legal and Islamic freedom... Legal freedom is freedom in the basis of Islamic thoughts. Freedom should be limited to what Islam and the law says.*<sup>42</sup>

Respondents tended to link these social controls with Islamic principles, but at the same time maintain that with social restrictions in place, democracy was desirable in Afghanistan. This indicates to some extent that the “unlimited freedom” often associated with democracy is not necessarily considered integral to a democratic means of selecting government, but rather is seen to come with the “Western package” of democratisation, along with other individual, liberal characteristics such as secularism and “immorality” (see section 4.2).

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37 This assumption runs contrary to the information gathered in rural areas for this study, where a general understanding of and appreciation for the right to take part in choosing government was found. Having said this, the study was not able to reach rural areas further than 100km from the provincial centre or those that were not easily accessible by road. There is space for further research in these areas which AREU’s forthcoming extension of this study will attempt to fill.

38 This kind of attitude has been noted in several other AREU studies including Anna Larson, “A Mandate to Mainstream: Promoting Gender Equality in Afghanistan” (Kabul: AREU, 2008).

39 Exact figures are unavailable given the paucity of accurate data on population figures, but the Central Statistics Offices estimates in 2007-2008 were that of 23,511,400 total population, 18,181,200 (77%) were living in rural areas, “CSO Estimated Population Figures, 2007-08” (Kabul: CSO 2008). According to United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) statistics, 68% of people in Afghanistan are under the age of 25, “A Socio-Economic and Demographic Profile, 2003-2005” (volume for all of Afghanistan, UNFPA, 2007), 19.

40 Male tailor, urban Kabul.

41 Female teacher, urban Balkh Province

42 Male community leader and shopkeeper, urban Kabul.

Discussions about the coexistence and complementarity of Islam and democracy in national government were numerous and varied during interviews for this study.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, a general consensus emerged determining that Islamic values can (and already do) accommodate universal public participation in elections, and “democracy” in general (with some social controls). The values specifically referred to by respondents when making this argument included democratic elections, social equality and women’s rights, which are generally all seen as falling within an “Islamic framework”—in Dari, *charchaokat-e Islam*, literally, the “four fixed edges” of Islam. While differing from respondent to respondent, the set of values identified as within the *charchaokat* were described in such a way as to denote a lifestyle with which people identified, as opposed to a lifestyle/value-set outside the framework with which they did not. This binary was often expressed in terms of “our” kind of value system against “their’s”—or Islamic vs Western democracy.

## 4.2 Islamic/Western democracy

Respondents referring to this dichotomy were numerous and reflected an array of social backgrounds, indicating that this way of conceptualising democracy in Afghanistan is not uncommon. Western democracy was generally associated with immorality and secularism—and for these reasons rejected—while Islamic democracy was considered to encompass positive values that would be acceptable in an Afghan context:

*I think there are many similarities between Islam and democracy. These similarities include individual freedom, freedom of speech, freedom of belief and religion, election of government, voting and many more. But there are some issues which create differences between Western liberal democracy and Islam, such as the individual freedom to women, and even in western democracies same-sex marriages are legal but in Islam and Afghan culture these freedoms seem to be immoral.*<sup>44</sup>

*There are two kinds of democracy. One is Islamic democracy and the other one is Western democracy. Western democracy is not acceptable and applicable for Afghans, because it is opposed to their religion and faith. According to Western democracy a married woman can have a boyfriend, while this kind of democracy is not acceptable in Afghanistan. Democracy should be in the framework of Islam and women should obey Islamic ideas, and then we can practice democracy in the country.*<sup>45</sup>

*Democracy is the government of the people by the people for the people, but in Afghanistan we have the government of the outsiders by the outsiders for the Afghan people. The actual definition is reversed in Afghanistan... The best democracy is Islamic democracy... We have a frame in Islam and we should not cross the borders or limits of that frame.*<sup>46</sup>

*Democracy means freedom, and of course we need it, but it should be Islamic democracy, not Western.*<sup>47</sup>

*We have copied some democratic values from Western countries and Afghanistan has*

43 There is a wealth of literature on this subject which will not be explored in detail here. For more information/analysis see for example John L. Esposito and John O. Voll, *Islam and Democracy* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Islam and the Challenge of Democracy* (NJ, USA: Princeton University Press, 2004); also Oleson, *Islam and Politics in Afghanistan*, for analysis of Islamic politics in Afghanistan specifically, and *Journal of Democracy* 19, No. 3, on Islamist Parties and Democracy.

44 Male community leader, urban Kabul.

45 Male teacher, urban Kabul.

46 Male student, urban Balkh Province.

47 Female student, rural Balkh Province.

*signed some human rights declarations, but I don't think they are adoptable in our Islamic society. By showing naked pictures of women on TV or using women as a tool for business announcements we can't claim that there is a democracy in Afghanistan.*<sup>48</sup>

A recurring theme throughout interviews, as demonstrated in three of the quotations above, was the strong association of Western democracy with women and morality. This was not prompted by the interviewers, and was a key issue raised by both men and women respondents. Indeed, it is almost as if a chain of linkages is made: democracy = West = immorality = women, the latter two being connected as a result of the widespread cultural norm in Afghanistan for women to be responsible for family honour and moral standing.<sup>49</sup> To some (Afghans and others), the suggestion that “women’s individual freedoms” do not coincide with Islam represents an “undemocratic” viewpoint. Indeed, to others, this would also represent an un-Islamic viewpoint. Thus, while many respondents made the link between western democracy and women, there is no common agreement over what women’s role or freedoms should constitute in an Afghan or Islamic democracy. These “individual freedoms” were not specifically defined by the respondent, and even if they had been, may have been contested by another. Nevertheless, among women and men respondents there was a clear theme advocating some kind of middle ground between extremes—as one female participant in a focus group discussion articulated, “Afghan women neither want to be beaten with whips nor do they want to see naked pictures of women on TV screens or movies.”<sup>50</sup> Interestingly, no respondent in any province, male or female, made reference to the high numbers of women in political office in Afghanistan at present (largely as a result of the reserved seats system specified in the constitution).<sup>51</sup> This would seem to indicate that among those interviewed *in the three provinces studied*, women’s role in the public sphere is for the most part accepted—or at least not the talking point that it was in 2005.

Essentially, the issue at stake here appears to be in line with Zakaria’s thesis—the merging of democratic politics with Western liberal values—but also the difficulty in defining which of these values (if any) fit within the *charchaokat-e Islam* in Afghanistan. One female Islamic scholar interviewed for this study summarised the point:

*Afghanistan is an Islamic country. Democracy is good as a system of governance in Afghanistan. Democracy is not a value. If it is considered a value including the values practiced as democracy in the Western community, we don't accept it, because it is not applicable with our Islamic and traditional values. If we bring Western democracy to this community, it will be a paradox. But if we can combine and merge positive and applicable aspects of democracy with our Islamic and traditional values, we will be very successful people.*<sup>52</sup>

Evidently, democracy and democratisation are both value-laden processes. It is clear that for many respondents, Western and Islamic values are fundamentally different, but that there is some overlap in terms of “democratic principles” which span both categories. Clearly defining the content of this overlap, however—when there is no consensus among Afghans as to what it should constitute—remains an elusive prospect, notwithstanding the question of who should be given the task. There remains a significant question over

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48 Female community leader, Kabul city.

49 For more information see Nancy Tapper, *Bartered Brides: Politics, Gender and Marriage in an Afghan Tribal Society* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

50 Female community leader, urban Kabul Province.

51 Articles 83 and 84, Constitution of Afghanistan (unofficial translation in *The A to Z guide to Afghanistan Assistance* [Kabul: AREU, 2009], 100). For more on the reserved seats system, see Wordsworth, “A Matter of Interests.”

52 Female religious teacher, urban Kabul Province.

which actors would take on this (highly subjective) task of defining acceptable values, and over what an inclusive forum for this discussion might look like.

This paper does not put forward solutions to these problems. Nevertheless, it argues that this is a relevant and necessary debate in the current context. An inclusive national assessment of democratic values and their meaning in the Afghan context has been lacking to date, and could be constructive in generating acceptance of democracy in general. Before this could happen, there would need to be visible political will at the highest levels endorsing the democratic system, but publically encouraging debate as to what this might constitute in the Afghan context. Evidently, this kind of discussion could produce outcomes which do not sit comfortably with liberal/Western democratic principles, but it is important that democracy be defined on Afghan terms in order to counter the accusation that it is an imported, and thus expendable, political system.

### 4.3 Democracy associated with security and rule of law

A third key trend noticeable in interviews was the association of democracy with security. This was often expressed from a negative perspective, indicating that the situation now in Afghanistan is not democratic due to the lack of these key factors:

*Is this a democracy, when girls can't go to school to read, when violence against girls takes place in many provinces like Kandahar and Faryab? When acid is spread on the faces of girls, where is democracy? When girls are poisoned in the schools of Parwan how we can say that we have democracy?<sup>53</sup> Democracy is only here by name, there is no real democracy, and we can say that we have never had democracy at all.<sup>54</sup>*

*People are just walking along a street and a while later their dead body is brought to their house: people cannot move freely in their own surroundings. How much of a democracy is this? The conditions we have right now in our country are not democratic.<sup>55</sup>*

*In Afghanistan we didn't have democracy before and we don't have it now. I don't know what to talk about, to me there is nothing to discuss about Afghan democracy, and we hear only slogans... In the developed world democracy is implemented by the people and the governments. There are rights for the people, they can vote freely and independently. But in Afghanistan this is not the case. Here there is force and guns... the warlords forced the people to vote for them. If they don't vote for a particular warlord their life is in danger. This is what we see in Afghanistan in the name of democracy, this is a shame for democracy.<sup>56</sup>*

*The growth of democracy is possible when there is security. In my opinion we cannot have democracy without it.<sup>57</sup>*

Evidently, the concepts of free and fair elections and universal suffrage are called into question when votes are gained (or at least perceived to be gained) by force, and when polling stations cannot be established in various insecure parts of the country.

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53 The respondent is here referring to a series of incidents across the country in which acid has been thrown at schoolgirls by extremist groups ideologically opposed to girls' education. In Parwan province in May 2009 there were reports of toxic gas being dispersed in girls' school playgrounds by fundamentalist groups also. See for example "Fear of Gas Attacks Keeps Afghan Girls Home," *MSNBC*, 14 May 2009, [www.msnbc.msn.com/id/30747859](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/30747859) (accessed 5 August 2009).

54 Female student, urban Parwan Province.

55 Female student, urban Balkh Province.

56 Male community leader, urban Kabul Province.

57 Female student, urban Balkh Province.

Indeed, fears of insurgent attacks appear to have prevented many voters in some provinces (Helmand, for example) from coming to the polls in August 2009.<sup>58</sup> But the insecurity mentioned by respondents goes beyond that of the election period—many talked about the general insecurity that is encountered by citizens on a daily basis. In a previous AREU study this trend in decreasing security was shown to affect the issues that parliamentarians and party leaders felt comfortably raising in public, which brings substantive representation in question also.<sup>59</sup> In general, day-to-day insecurity was a key concern and led to respondents stating that democracy is non-existent, or at a “low-level” in Afghanistan. This presents a serious scenario because above all, if citizens do not believe in either electoral processes, nor in the ability of the government that is elected to keep the peace between them, the incentive to participate is considerably lessened.

This is linked to the respondents’ views on rule of law. Many considered the prospect of democracy without it impossible. Primary examples given included the perception that “rich people were above the law” and that bribery surpassed the law for any who could afford it.<sup>60</sup> This was followed in a number of cases by the concern that the government had not paid enough attention to the judiciary during Karzai’s term in office. These are legitimate concerns, and they are also indicative of the high expectations people have of democracy and democratic systems—not only are they expected to provide a legitimate government, but also a means of policing the state in a “fair” manner. This subject will be explored further in the forthcoming expansion of this research.

#### **4.4 Democracy associated with poverty reduction, economic development and equality**

A final theme discussed widely in interviews concerning what democracy should be in Afghanistan was economic development. A number of points were raised on this subject, including firstly, the implausibility of a functioning democracy coinciding with widespread poverty and the common prioritisation of material goods over the opportunity to choose candidates to vote for in an election:

*When the candidates prepare some food for the people, talk for a while and ask the people for their vote, all the people accept their ideas and decide to vote for them without thinking properly.<sup>61</sup>*

*To make the people understand is a very difficult task because of the weak economy. Anyone who provides economic interests for the people wins the votes; the people take that side and vote for that person.<sup>62</sup>*

*We are witnessing people voting because of money, cooking oil, wheat and other things. Actually people change the future of our country just for a bit of oil... Is this democracy?<sup>63</sup>*

The perception that many Afghans (and particularly those in rural areas) would prioritise short-term economic gains over the prospect of being able to vote freely was common

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58 See for example “Ambassador Backs Afghan Mission,” *BBC News*, 27 August 2009, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/8223722.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/8223722.stm) (accessed 27 August 2009).

59 Anna Larson, *Afghanistan’s New Democratic Parties: A Means to Organise Democratisation?* (Kabul: AREU, 2009).

60 Interviews in Kabul, Balkh and Parwan provinces.

61 Male government employee, urban Parwan Province.

62 Female government employee, urban Parwan Province.

63 Male teacher, rural Balkh Province.

among respondents. Urban respondents in particular perceived that rural poverty was engendering the use of potential votes as a means to extract monetary or material payoffs, indicating a preoccupation with short-term, practical and localised needs as opposed to longer-term, strategic interests at the national level.<sup>64</sup> For many of these urban respondents, this delegitimised the electoral process and rendered void the prospect of political representation. This concern echoes the globally debated issue of whether democratic politics brings about economic growth and/or poverty reduction, or whether growth and poverty reduction are rather preconditions for democratisation.<sup>65</sup> Data collected for this paper indicates that in Afghanistan, the latter is perceived a more likely scenario.

Nevertheless, on election day itself, in parts of rural Kabul province, these fears were not substantiated. Voters were found to be actively manipulating candidates by accepting gifts and food from more than one, and even promising votes to candidates and then voting for someone entirely different.<sup>66</sup> This was also noted in urban areas of the province, such as Dasht-e Barchi, where a common narrative was that in these elections, people were more “aware”, and would not sell their votes but would decide themselves which candidate to choose. This also resulted in disappointed candidates, who talked in AREU interviews about being let down by voters who had promised their support. Thus, while the practice of selling votes for material gain was probably common on a national scale, it does not necessarily indicate a lack of ownership or political intention of voters.

A second point made on the theme of economic development was that of a general comparison between Afghanistan’s economic status and that of established democratic states. A predominant perception among respondents was that given unemployment, poverty and corruption, Afghanistan could not be classed as a democracy, by extension making the assumption that “real” democracies do not have these kinds of economic problems:

*I think economically we were not ready to accept and practice democracy in the country, because we don't have enough economic resources in the country. In addition, we don't have ports or appropriate trade borders. We are very different from Western countries and their people... There is no life guarantee in Afghanistan and people are very poor, but in Western countries everything is insured and there is no reason not to practice democracy. We should think about the factors that have an impact on democratisation in the country. Poverty is one of the main obstacles to democracy in the country.<sup>67</sup>*

*[T]he actions of the present government have defamed democracy in Afghanistan.*

64 Strategic interests might include trying to ensure substantive representation in parliament, for example. The practical needs/strategic interests discourse was developed in feminist literature initially, as an anthropological tool. For details see Naila Kabeer, *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought* (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 90-91.

65 See for example Adrian Leftwich, Evelyn Huber, Mustaq Khan, Jean Grugel and B He, “Debate: Democracy and Development” in *New Political Economy* 7, no. 2, (2002): 269-281; Huntington, “Democracy’s Third Wave,”; Diamond, “A Universal democracy?”; and Lisa Horner, “How and Why has Multiparty Democracy Spread Over the Past 100 Years, and What Difference Does it Make to the Lives of the Poor?” (Oxford: Oxfam, 2008). Evidently, other factors also prove preconditions for democratic governance, such as basic security, rule of law, and literacy. Nevertheless, economic growth which transcends social divides is considered by many a significant indicator of democracy’s chances of taking hold—see Frances Stewart and Meghan O’Sullivan, “Democracy, Conflict and Development - Three Cases” (Oxford: University of Oxford, 1998), <http://www3.qeh.ox.ac.uk/RePEc/qeh/qehwps/qehwps15.pdf> (accessed 14 August 2008).

66 For concrete examples see Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, “Patronage, Posturing, Duty, Demographics: Why Afghans Voted in 2009” (Kabul: AREU, 2009).

67 Male religious scholar and teacher, urban Kabul Province.

*I can say there is no democracy in Afghanistan anymore. The people have seen the actions of nationals and internationals in Afghanistan; there is corruption, nepotism, and the compromising of all state property. The people of Afghanistan can't call this democracy anymore.*<sup>68</sup>

In many cases, the standards set for judging the quality of Afghan democracy were based on key characteristics of established democracies—for example high levels of economic development, rule of law, and checks and balances against corrupt practices. This is an understandable correlation but demonstrates extremely high expectations of what a democratic system should provide. These characteristics also then become similar to the values added to definitions of democracy, as discussed above—they become integrally part of what democracy means, and thus if a country does not live up to these standards it becomes either a “non-democracy”, or the democratic system in itself is blamed. In other words, “we don’t want democracy if this is all we get.” This is a concern because if democracy, as implemented by the Government of Afghanistan, does not present an attractive or viable alternative to the kind of governance promised by anti-government actors, support for insurgent groups may increase. Linked to this, a number of respondents for this study talked about the merits of a strong authoritarian leader over democracy, at least for Afghanistan’s initial post-conflict recovery period, because of the possibility of achieving greater economic development in a shorter timeframe.

A third point relates to the specific kind of economic development associated with democratic governance. For many respondents, democracy is linked to equality and economic justice, as regulated by the state. Free market capitalism is often considered in a negative light, as the following quotations demonstrate:

*If anyone calls the present situation of Afghanistan a democracy, they actually defame democracy. Democracy has its own principles. If the people and the government don't follow the principles of democracy the situation may change to anarchy. I will give you a good example: a journalist asked the ex-mayor of Kabul, “how much is a loaf of bread?” He replied, “I don't know, because now we have a free market, the bakeries can sell their bread for whatever price they want.” This is the case with other businesses also. This means that in Afghanistan we don't have a democracy, it is anarchy.*<sup>69</sup>

*I think we do not have democracy in Afghanistan, because the poor become poorer and rich become richer. I think the main goal of democracy is equality, but there is no equality in Afghanistan... If we think about the history of our Prophet, we know that we had the best democracy in that time. All the people lived at the same level and everything was based on their morals and traditions. I agree with such kind of democracy.*<sup>70</sup>

In these statements it is possible to note the same kind of desire for social controls as expressed in quotations about democracy and freedom (Section 4.1). The attitude toward free market economics and capitalism as expressed in the first quotation above was found to be particularly common among respondents and seems to reflect a degree of reminiscence towards the socialist policies of the nominally democratic PDPA. There is a general mistrust of capitalist economics among Afghans,<sup>71</sup> which is probably linked to the perception that this too is a Western import.

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68 Male community leader, urban Kabul Province.

69 Male community leader, urban Kabul Province.

70 Male teacher, urban Kabul Province.

71 For further information on the issue of privatisation in Afghanistan, see Anna Patterson and James Blewett with Asif Karimi, “Putting the Cart Before the Horse? Privatisation and Economic Reform in Afghanistan” (Kabul: AREU, 2006).

Interestingly, in this case “real” democracy is associated with a state-regulated, social-democratic rather than liberal model of government—essentially due to perceptions of what is socially and economically *just*. This is exemplified in the way that in a number of cases, the discrepancy between salary levels for government employees was also deemed “undemocratic”.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, equality between ethnic groups was considered of paramount importance, and Karzai’s attempt to represent all major ethnicities in his cabinet a positive step towards democratisation.<sup>73</sup> A link can be made here between respondents’ attitudes towards perceived injustices or inequalities, and the discourse of social justice in Islam.

Essentially, there is a consensus among respondents that a democratic system of governance is a desirable goal for Afghanistan, but there are nuances and contradictions within and between interview transcripts concerning what such a system might look like. Certain trends do appear, however. While public participation in selecting government was overwhelmingly supported, values considered important to add to this basic definition of democracy were very specific to Afghanistan’s Islamic, post/continuing-conflict and post-communist context. There was also a clear indication from respondents that the current system of governance in Afghanistan is significantly lacking in the qualities needed for substantive democratisation—and is particularly inadequate in terms of facilitating the political representation of citizens.

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72 Various interviews.

73 Various interviews.

## 5. Experiences of Representative Processes

According to a minimalist definition of democracy, free elections and universal suffrage—the means to widespread, substantive political representation—are considered the only fundamental principles.<sup>74</sup> Correspondingly, this section looks at issues of political representation as described and experienced by those interviewed for the study. First, perceptions of how people are represented at the national and provincial levels will be discussed in terms of the technical processes and institutions that ostensibly facilitate the voicing of public concerns in the political sphere. Second, public opinions of representatives themselves, both individuals and parties, and how they function are analysed. Third, the question of who is represented by these representatives is considered, with a focus on individual versus group voting and the notion of constituency.<sup>75</sup>

### 5.1 Processes and places of representation

Citizens are formally represented in Afghanistan primarily through the technical process of elections.<sup>76</sup> The majority of interviews for this paper were conducted in the run-up to presidential and Provincial Council (PC) elections in 2009, and as such the elections were widely discussed by respondents. First and foremost, a key preoccupation was the potential (lack of) credibility of the electoral process:

*[In the last election] I saw that many people had many election cards, and for the future election this will be the same. I myself have two cards, one from the past election and one from the recent registration process. I know of people who have between 10-20 cards. If you go to a registration centre now they don't ask you whether you got a card before or not. They only want to show that the number of people registered has increased.*<sup>77</sup>

*There are many reasons to show that the coming election will not be transparent, for example Karzai is using government resources for his own purposes. And also in the election time one person becomes the representative of a number of people and votes instead of them, on their behalf, which is not legal but it happens in Afghanistan. In fact, everyone has the right to vote for any person that he likes.*<sup>78</sup>

*My opinion is that people come to Afghanistan with boxes of money and buy the votes of people.*<sup>79</sup>

*In the last election people were more hopeful, but in the future they don't think that they will have a decision-making role, especially in the presidential elections—therefore they are hopeless this time.*<sup>80</sup>

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74 Zakaria, “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy.”

75 This section gives an overview on respondents’ opinions of how and by whom they as individuals or groups are represented. It does not provide the basis for judgements on the quality of representation per se in Afghanistan, or how people’s interests are represented in general, simply because this would require a much larger study with a broader sample of respondents.

76 For more on public opinion in the run up to the 2009 and 2010 elections in Afghanistan see for example International Crisis Group, “Afghanistan’s Election Challenges,” Asia Report N° 171, 24 June 2009, [www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=6176](http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=6176) (accessed 25 June 2009); Martine van Bijlert, “How to Win an Afghan Election” (Kabul: Afghan Analysts Network, August 2009); and “Afghanistan Public Opinion Survey” (International Republican Institute, July 2009) (accessed on [www.iri.org](http://www.iri.org)).

77 Male student, urban Balkh Province.

78 Male teacher, rural Balkh Province.

79 Female teacher, urban Parwan Province.

80 Male community leader, rural Parwan Province.

The perceived degree of fraud in itself has served to delegitimise election processes in the eyes of many Afghans. Interestingly, a large number of respondents talked about high levels of corruption and vote-buying in the 2004-05 elections, contradicting the generally positive post-elections statements of the international community.<sup>81</sup> This appears to have led to a mistrust of international intentions and a further solidification of the idea that the outcome of elections is predetermined by foreign intervention, which in itself is a point of considerable concern.<sup>82</sup> If, as the last quotation (which is representative of many respondents' opinions) suggests, people perceive that their vote is unimportant—or indeed impotent—the incentive to participate in elections is again greatly decreased and the outcome of substantive political representation even more elusive.<sup>83</sup> Having said this, roughly half of those interviewed who expressed dissatisfaction with the electoral process indicated that in spite of its flaws, they would participate.<sup>84</sup>

It is not possible to speculate on the basis of this data whether perceived fraud or pre-determined outcome did in fact prevent participation on elections day. The fairly low turnout estimates of 30-40% could reflect a number of factors, including decreased security. In the days *after* the polls, however, local media, candidates and voters alike were very vocal about the apparent extent of ballot-stuffing and miscounting, with complaints to the Electoral Complaints Commission escalating as the counting process continued. Indeed, this led to some reports claiming that this election had “undermined democracy” in Afghanistan.<sup>85</sup> At the time of writing, the outcome of these complaints remains to be seen, but the potential political value of emphasising allegations of fraud to opposition candidates aiming to establish bargaining positions is becoming evident.<sup>86</sup>

Another issue to consider is that of perceived outcomes of the technical process of elections, in terms of the usefulness and viability of the representative institutions to which candidates are elected. The individuals and parties elected will be discussed in Section 5.2, but perceptions of these institutions themselves are worth mentioning due to their overwhelmingly negative nature:

*Sometimes you don't know who is the most powerful and playing a key role in Kabul. For example, all the powerful people tried to make Spanta, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, resign from his position and majority of parliament backed the demand, but no one could make him resign from his position. It was just Karzai who supported*

81 Various interviews. See also Andrew Wilder, *A House Divided: Analysing the 2005 Afghan Elections* (Kabul: AREU, 2005), for a comprehensive discussion of perceptions of corruption in the 2005 parliamentary elections.

82 Interestingly, Louis Dupree documents public concern in 1962 about the outcome of municipal elections in Kabul being predetermined, by national elites such as ministers rather than by outside intervention. Dupree, “Afghanistan’s Slow March to Democracy.”

83 The perception that the outcome of elections is determined by outside influence is more likely to affect turnout for the presidential elections, as opposed to parliamentary polls in 2010. While these also will probably be affected by fraud and vote-buying, they may be seen as having less international influence in their outcome. This is due to the perception that foreign (international) interest in the outcomes of Wolesi Jirga and Provincial Council elections will not be as great given their considerably weak influence on Afghan national policy. Having said this, interference from neighbouring countries may be perceived as higher in the Wolesi Jirga (and to a lesser extent, Provincial Council) elections due to the suspicion that Iran and Pakistan want to interfere in parliamentary politics.

84 This does not however necessarily indicate trust in the process—the decision to participate could be the result of a number of factors, including coercion, bargaining or local contests between influential personalities.

85 Havana Marking, “It is Insulting to Afghans to Declare Their Election a Success,” *The Guardian*, 23 August 2009.

86 This phenomenon will be discussed in detail in a forthcoming AREU discussion paper on the elections (October 2009).

*Spanta and finally no one could confront Karzai's decision.*<sup>87</sup>

*Unfortunately the expectations of the people were not met because the structure of parliament was unsuitable. In parliament there have been competitions based on region, parties, ethnicities and personalities... In this parliament those who have financial resources are the winners, and only these people have the chance to play the game.*<sup>88</sup>

*The MPs tried very hard but the highest officials of the government have not heard their voices.*<sup>89</sup>

This skeptical perception of parliament as an institution for the voicing of citizens' concerns is not surprising necessarily, given that it has only been functioning for four years, but it is indicative of the unmet (and exaggerated) expectations of MPs concerning their own potential achievements, and of citizens concerning potential parliamentary outputs. What is more worrying perhaps is the comparative perceived impotence of parliament, as expressed in the second quotation above, vis-à-vis executive or presidential powers. The example of the vote of no confidence for Dr Spanta was cited frequently in interviews, indicating that this apparent breach of parliamentary authority did not go publically unnoticed and contributes to an increasingly skeptical public view of parliament as a decision-making body.

Provincial councils were prescribed in Afghanistan's constitution as a means to bridge the gap between national and local level politics in the country, but have developed a reputation as relatively worthless institutions, whose political clout is dependent on their relationship with provincial governors and which have been systematically overlooked by international development actors.<sup>90</sup> The PC mandate remains vague, and does not devolve any significant level of decision-making from the central level.<sup>91</sup> In both Balkh and Parwan provinces, respondents talked about other, informal elders' or religious shuras as being more powerful than the PCs, and having more influence over political and developmental decision-making in the province.<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, in the run up to elections in 2009, while the majority of international attention was diverted towards presidential polls, in all three provinces studied for this research the number of candidates for the PC elections increased from that in 2005,<sup>93</sup> and a flurry of posters were produced. In Balkh, while new candidates for the 19 PC positions were plentiful, many of the most influential members of the PC did not re-register, amidst speculation that they will campaign for Wolesi Jirga (WJ) seats in 2010. Thus, while the PC as an institution is seen largely as weak in terms of its representational capacity, it appears to be nevertheless considered a potential stepping stone for candidates into greater and higher political vocations.<sup>94</sup>

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87 Male teacher, urban Kabul Province.

88 Male community leader, urban Balkh Province.

89 Female student, urban Balkh Province.

90 ICG, "Political Parties in Afghanistan," 3-4.

91 Provincial Council Law, see Articles 2 and 5, as cited in ICG, "Political Parties in Afghanistan," p3-4.

92 In Balkh this was the case with the Elders' Shura and in Parwan with the Ulema Shura. Essentially the decision-making power and influence of both formal and informal structures depends who the members are, and how much influence they are able to exert, due to their level of connections.

93 In Balkh, 118 candidates were registered in 2005 compared with 138 in 2009 (for 19 seats); in Parwan, the difference is more notable with 69 candidates in 2005 compared with 115 in 2009 (for 15 seats); in Kabul, there were 217 candidates in 2005 compared with 524 in 2009 for 29 seats. Source: www.iec.org.af, also Joint Electoral Management Body statistics from 2004/05, private copy.

94 Motivations for gaining WJ seats are varied however, and could include increased opportunities for patronage gains, greater public renown and higher government salaries—especially if the parliament is generally not considered a politically effective institution.

Furthermore, the questions over the functionality and utility of PCs did not prevent people voting in the PC elections in 2009. According to interviews conducted with those voting and not voting on election day, the perceived role of PCs did not seem to be a factor in determining whether or not people came to the polls.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, the official legislative functions of provincial councils appear to have little to do with why people voted, with those interviewed emphasising instead the importance of local and ethnic representation, and the potential for future service provision from individual elected representatives.

In sum, processes and places for political representation in Afghanistan were for the most part considered ineffective by respondents for this study. While this cannot be interpreted as the will to abolish them, it nevertheless displays a widespread public disappointment with the quality of representative institutions, which could result in an increasingly negative perception of democratic governance.

## 5.2 Representatives: Individuals and parties

It is important to also explore public perceptions of the individual representatives elected in 2005. The following quotations are representative of most respondents, who were strongly critical of their MPs:

*If we look at Balkh province, I think it is the weakest province in terms of representation, because not even 5% of the people are happy with the MPs. Up to now I don't remember that any of the MPs have participated in the discussions with the media or expressed their views and ideas about Balkh province. Also the MPs are working as "commission workers"—anyone who needs anything done in the government should pay the MPs some money and then the MPs will finish his work.<sup>96</sup>*

*If the people chose [the MPs], their choice was blind and now they repent of this choice. The MPs promised they would do something for widows, youths, and schools, but all of these promises were a complete lie. The MPs are not united and they always fight inside parliament with [plastic water] bottles. We don't want this kind of parliament anymore... They promised the people they would build small towns for teachers, increase the salary of teachers, but they requested their own salaries to be increased, built some buildings for themselves, and ignored us.<sup>97</sup>*

*All the MPs are working for their own benefits and they are engaged in earning money and saving their positions. They never wanted to serve the people. When we faced some problems unfortunately we didn't get any assistance from them. MPs are busy with their individual business.<sup>98</sup>*

In the majority of cases, MPs were criticised for not delivering on the promises they made in their campaigns, and not providing key practical services—thus confusing their actual role as law-makers with that of service-providers. In others (usually but not exclusively in urban areas) respondents were more inclined to blame the electoral or parliamentary

<sup>95</sup> These interviews were conducted as part of AREU's post-elections analysis. See AREU post-elections brief by Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, "Patronage, Posturing, Duty, Demographics: Why Afghans voted in 2009" (Kabul: AREU, August 2009) and a forthcoming AREU discussion paper expanding on this subject (October 2009).

<sup>96</sup> Male NGO representative, urban Balkh Province.

<sup>97</sup> Female teacher, urban Parwan Province. MPs are given plastic water bottles in plenary sessions and there have been incidents in which they have been thrown at individuals during speeches. See for example Tim Albone, "Woman MP is Attacked in a Blow for Democracy," *Times Online*, 9 May 2006, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article714655.ece>.

<sup>98</sup> Male teacher, urban Kabul Province.

system for a lack of substantive representation, rather than the individuals themselves—and made the argument that an MP’s role was to represent interests as opposed to provide services. Yet other respondents, as in the first quotation above, commented on the lack of public presence and connection with constituents. In interviews in rural districts it was reported several times that MPs had not visited since their campaigns in 2005:

*Neither MPs nor PCs did well. We only saw them during the campaign, and since then they have never come to the district to talk to the people and to know their problems.*<sup>99</sup>

In this way, in both urban and rural communities, a disconnect between constituents and their elected representatives was described.<sup>100</sup> Interestingly, this gap was evident not only in the ways in which people talked about their lack of contact with MPs, but also in terms of who they even considered their MPs to *be*, as the following responses from Balkh province highlight:

*We don’t have any representative in parliament, but I have some information about Badakhshan Province. They have a person in parliament, but this person didn’t do anything for their people. I know that MPs never want to serve the people, they only want to feed themselves.*<sup>101</sup>

*The representative of the people should be from among them, he or she should live among the people to be known by the people, be familiar with people. They should understand the problems of the people. From [our] district, which is the most populated district in the province, we don’t have a representative in parliament.*<sup>102</sup>

*During Karzai’s time all the focus has been on the centre of the province. All the aid is coming and being spent in the centre of the province, while the districts are totally ignored. Nobody talks about districts, even the governor also focuses on the city to show to the international community that he is very active. Actually he ignores the majority of the people, who remain neglected. The MPs also focus on the provincial capital. In the past election the MPs were chosen on a provincial level, therefore the districts remain ignored and the people cannot differentiate good candidates from bad ones because of the lack of information about them.*<sup>103</sup>

While for this province 11 parliamentary seats are allocated,<sup>104</sup> the first respondent cited above does not identify with any of them, and the second expresses a perceived lack of local representation in parliament in spite of the fact that official parliamentary constituencies are determined at the provincial (and not district) level. This serves to emphasise the way in which “real” or substantive representation is perceived as a highly localised function, which constitutes lobbying for community concerns, and which cannot be undertaken by anyone who does not have a thorough understanding of them. This is often expressed in terms of a lack of *ashnai*, or familiarity, with a community. Thus, the relative disenfranchisement from parliament/provincial councils of “unrepresented” district communities.<sup>105</sup>

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99 Male community leader, rural Balkh Province.

100 Of course, this is not uncommon in “established” democracies either.

101 Female teacher, rural Balkh Province (different district to above).

102 Male teacher, rural Balkh Province.

103 Female teacher, rural Balkh Province.

104 Seats per province are allocated based on (rough) population estimates.

105 This happens to some degree also with the provincial councils, except that there is more chance that districts will be represented in these bodies provided that there are not more than one or two strong candidates competing in the elections in each district. The Single Non-transferable Vote (SNTV) voting system

This extremely local nature of political representation in Afghanistan was demonstrated in interviews conducted on and around election day, in which it became clear that reasons for voting were far more localised than media portrayals (of a collective defiance against the Taliban, for example) suggested.<sup>106</sup> Respondents talked about voting in the PC elections for a community leader or elder who was well-known in the local area and familiar with its problems. However, this did not prevent a number of candidates competing for the same votes in a given area, and thus when results are announced it is likely that, as a result of the single non-transferable vote system (SNTV), votes will have been divided in many communities and no candidate will be successful. The result: many Afghans will be left again considering themselves unrepresented in PCs.

Alongside perspectives of individual representatives, this study also explored public opinion of party politics and representation.<sup>107</sup> According to common belief, parties<sup>108</sup> are unpopular in Afghanistan due to their being associated with civil warfare and ethnic identities.<sup>109</sup> This was found to be true in a number of respondents' attitudes towards parties:

*There are different parties, and some of them support particular candidates. If a person becomes president from one party then he will make all the cabinet from his own party members, and then fighting will start between his party and the others which failed.*<sup>110</sup>

*Our parties claim to be political but actually they are military groups. When they wanted to become political they changed into ethnic groups. Unfortunately in Afghanistan, every action is extremist, and every party's actions are extremist.*<sup>111</sup>

*In this area political parties had no role in the last election and so we had a good and peaceful election. [In the] city it was different, parties played a role in the election and encouraged people to vote for the party's interests.*<sup>112</sup>

Having said this, a more subtle perspective on party politics is evident throughout most of the data collected on this subject—a general sense of the potential utility of parties as political actors is common, albeit followed by the caveat that, in Afghanistan, parties are too flawed to take up this role:

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dictates unlimited multi-member constituencies in which any number of candidates can put themselves forward, running the risk of splitting the public vote between candidates, none of whom can then score highly enough to win.

106 Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, "Patronage, Posturing, Duty, Demographics."

107 This follows from an earlier AREU study (Larson, *Afghanistan's New Democratic Parties*) in which a top-down approach was taken (the majority of respondents were party leaders). This paper complements the earlier study in providing a "bottom-up" or public perspective of parties and their potential role in democratisation. Incidentally, in this study, when asking about parties, the research team did not differentiate between different types of parties, but waited to see whether respondents themselves would make distinctions between them.

108 Parties in Afghanistan do not fit the standard definition of the term as they do not formally comprise a part of the electoral system and are not "institutionalised" as parties tend to be in established democracies. They are largely formed on the bases of ethnicity and/or personality as opposed to ideological platform. Nevertheless, they are to a greater or lesser degree active and can be extremely influential in mobilising voter support networks. For a comprehensive analysis of Afghan parties and their history, see Ruttig, "Islamists, Leftists and a Void in the Center."

109 International Crisis Group, "Political Parties in Afghanistan," Asia Report No. 39, 2 June 2005, available at [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org) (accessed 8 August 2008).

110 Male student, rural Parwan Province.

111 Young male government employee, urban Balkh Province.

112 Female teacher, rural Balkh Province.

*In my opinion, parties are not bad. When they are working for a specific ideology then they are good but unfortunately in Afghanistan the parties work for themselves or for their own interests. If they work for national interests, for instance education, health, etcetera, then it would be good, but they do not do this. Right now all the issues are linguistic issues. This causes the people to be uncomfortable. Parties in the past also worked for themselves, not for the people. So the people don't have a good impression of the parties due to their past actions. If parties played a role they could help to bring peace and security.<sup>113</sup>*

*Parties don't have a good role among the people in Afghanistan. Political parties should know the people's problems and introduce them to the government so that the parties can find their real position in the society. But now parties don't have any role in the society in terms of the policy-making process in the country. Now people are not ready to accept parties. In other societies, parties have a strong role in the policy-making process. In other societies it is parties that address people's problems and demands.<sup>114</sup>*

Key complaints with Afghan parties included their large number, similar platforms, lack of capacity, lack of ideological bases, ethnic focus, and lack of “national interests”. The latter contributes to the perception that parties serve to create divisions (specifically across ethnic lines) between people, as opposed to focusing on “national unity”:

*If the political parties became united, they would be good but unfortunately here the parties are not like this, they are against each other.<sup>115</sup>*

*We have experienced lots of parties in the past and they were going in the wrong direction towards negative competitions. In the past parties were working for themselves, not for the people. There should be one power in Afghanistan at a given time. There should not be different powers and different leaders at the same time.<sup>116</sup>*

*The Ministry [of Justice] should only allow parties which have a national perspective and are working for all Afghans, not just for their ethnicity and so on. Now we see people are members of parties and they are working for their own benefits rather than the public... There is no coordination among parties.<sup>117</sup>*

This general aversion to political competition between groups manifests itself in what appears to be an uneasiness toward political opposition more generally. This can be related on the one hand to the fact that in Afghanistan, politics is often a zero-sum game—and in a winner-take-all, highly centralised system, encouraging a culture of political opposition can carry considerable risks.<sup>118</sup> On the other hand, in a country in which the politics of consensus is often practiced, whereby decisions are not reached until every actor in a decision-making body has been convinced of a mutually-agreed outcome, the principles of majority rule and opposition more generally are not common features.<sup>119</sup> The need to avoid opposition is also connected, however, with the desire for stability in a volatile context, and an unwillingness to support any movement that might disrupt the peace. Opposition which begins as political difference could escalate into

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113 Female lecturer, Balkh University.

114 Male religious teacher, urban Kabul Province.

115 Female student, urban Parwan Province.

116 Male shopkeeper, urban Kabul Province.

117 Male teacher, urban Kabul Province.

118 For example, the Governor of Balkh siding with Abdullah Abdullah, as opposed to Karzai, could mean the loss of his governorship should Karzai win the presidential race.

119 While this is a very generalised statement, research for this study found evidence of consensus-based decision-making in a variety of different ethnic and geographical communities.

violent conflict. Given recent experience of civil conflict between political groups,<sup>120</sup> this concern is understandable—indeed, given the fact that there has been no precedent of lasting peaceful opposition between groups in Afghanistan’s political history throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the tendency to consider party/candidate competition in a negative light is wholly unsurprising.

However, this brings into question the assumption that democratisation will be a stabilising force in post-conflict countries. Encouraging multi-party competition may well be considered the best way to bring about democratic representation, modeled on political systems in established democracies, but this does not take into account the fact that parties emphasise divisions between groups and thus potentially fuel underlying identity politics and tensions.<sup>121</sup>

This is not to say that Afghan parties should be dismissed as irrelevant to political representation—in the 2005 parliamentary elections, parties managed to mobilise large blocs of support for candidates either formally or informally affiliated with them, in spite of the ostensibly unfavourable conditions towards parties of the SNTV voting system, and in spite of the apparent public disdain in which they are held.<sup>122</sup> Also, for some, certain parties remain a significant means of expressing political affiliation or identity. This is particularly the case with former mujahideen parties and factions, which are actively involved in mobilising voter support networks (often on ethnic and religious bases), to varying degrees of success.<sup>123</sup> Nevertheless, respondents for this study remained for the most part openly critical about their activities and their ability to “truly” represent public interests.

### 5.3 Representatives to represent—whom?

A final point to mention on the issue of representation is the question of who exactly is perceived as being (or supposedly being) represented in Afghanistan’s democratic system. While some urban respondents highlighted the need for Afghans as individual citizens to vote for their chosen candidate, the majority of other urban and rural data collected referred to voting as a collective process:

*[In the last election] we got information through village representatives in our town and then we decided about the suitable candidate for whom to vote.*<sup>124</sup>

*We want to vote for Dr Abdullah and we discussed this among our family members, because Dr Abdullah suffered a lot during the Jihad and he knows more about Afghanistan. Therefore we have made the decision to vote for him.*<sup>125</sup>

*In provinces and villages people are very simple so parties collect the people’s ID cards through the heads of villages for the coming election.*<sup>126</sup>

120 Most recent examples constitute the in-fighting between mujahideen groups in the early 1990s, which resulted in the destruction of large parts of Kabul, and later the Taliban’s systematic persecution of Hazara communities—both within the last 15-20 years.

121 For more on post-conflict democratisation and its potentially destabilising effects, see Roland Paris, *At War’s End*, and also Frances Stewart and Meghan O’Sullivan, “Democracy, Conflict and Development.”

122 For an analysis of how party candidates were successful in the 2005 elections, see Wilder, *A House Divided*.

123 Larson, *Afghanistan’s New Democratic Parties*.

124 Female teacher, rural Balkh Province.

125 Female student, urban Balkh Province.

126 Male shopkeeper, urban Kabul Province.

*Afghanistan is a type of collective society rather than an individualistic one; here there are tribes, ethnicities, religious groups, and regional/village systems. The people act according to whatever is told to them by their leaders or clans. One of the principles of democracy is that every individual who has wisdom is free. The government should be efficient, and not limited to a few groups. In a democratic government varieties of ideas should be encouraged and attention should be focused on individuals, not groups. In a democracy every individual has the right to express their views.*<sup>127</sup>

There are a number of factors contributing towards this apparent tendency towards group/bloc voting—one, as perceived by the fourth respondent cited above, due to the nature of “Afghan society”. This perspective is somewhat substantiated in data collected from rural areas, in which there was an evident sense of communities making consensual, collective decisions about electoral candidates.<sup>128</sup> Of course, as the respondent above points out, this does not sit comfortably with the individualism enshrined in Western liberal democracy. It also leads to the concern—largely among the literate, urban elite—that the majority of Afghanistan’s “uneducated” population will be coerced into voting for the candidates with whom their community leaders have bargained. Thus, the equalising quality of democratic politics giving the same weight of vote to all citizens, regardless of literacy rate or potential coercion of the illiterate/“uneducated” by predatory commanders, for example, can prove problematic.

Having said this, it is always problematic to assign causality to “culture”—particularly in this context given Afghanistan’s diverse population. It is necessary to also consider the effect of the electoral system on vote-patterns, and in doing this it can be seen that SNTV in fact emphasises the incentives for candidates to campaign to win the votes of entire villages, for example.<sup>129</sup> Due to the multi-member constituency stipulation, candidates do not need to win a majority of support in a given province, but rather need to fall within the number of highest scoring candidates corresponding with the number of seats reserved for that province. Thus, going back to one’s home district and generating collective support from the one or two villages on the basis of one’s *ashnai* with the community can generate an adequate number of votes for electoral success. Furthermore, if a candidate is or has connections to a local *ruidar*, or influential, familiar community member, they may be able to generate collective votes by the obligatory notion of *ruidari*—the support of a local leader to whom patronage is deemed due—on the basis of their familiarity as opposed to their suitability for the post.<sup>130</sup>

Essentially then, whether considered truly “democratic” or otherwise, the practice of voting by consensus is common in Afghanistan and should be acknowledged as such. Furthermore, it appears that regardless of the formal electoral system, voters in Afghanistan will mobilise along communal lines if this is perceived as the most effective means to support a successful candidate. In any event, the key issue at stake is not how people vote, but that Afghans across the country are able to consider themselves and their interests—whether individual or collective—adequately represented.

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127 Female student, urban Kabul Province.

128 This was also found in previous studies for AREU, with MPs relating stories about how community leaders came together and pulled names out of a bucket at random to decide between three potential candidates for their village, (Wordsworth, “A Matter of Interests”).

129 In Wilder, *A House Divided*, ethnic groups in Kandahar and Herat are found to have mobilised collectively during the 2005 parliamentary elections in order to try and take advantage of the SNTV system.

130 Interviews, Balkh Province.

## 6. Conclusions

Democracy is often considered a self-evident advantage to the political, social and economic development of states, and as such democratisation has been widely promoted as international best practice. This has been the case in Afghanistan, where the process of post-conflict democratisation has been a key focus of national and international actors. However, little attention has been paid to the meaning of the term in the Afghan context.

Although more data is needed, initial qualitative research undertaken in three provinces of Afghanistan for this study suggests that there is a decreasing level of acceptance of the current democratisation process among citizens for a number of reasons. Firstly, democracy is increasingly associated with the individual liberal freedoms of the West and thus distanced from Afghan religious and cultural norms. If liberal values continue to be considered “imposed” in Afghanistan, the result may be widespread disownership of the democratic process entirely, as a reaction against a perceived Western cultural “invasion”. Secondly, there is widespread disillusionment with the benefits that “democracy” can bring, due to an expected but lacking improvement in rule of law and economic development combined with a hopelessness brought about by deteriorating security. This is heightened by concerns that encouraging multi-party competition and political opposition could *contribute to insecurity* rather than promote peace and stability. Thirdly, democratic representation is seen as inherently flawed, due to the inefficacy and fraud perceived to infiltrate formal representative processes and the under-performance of elected representatives. Finally, there is a fundamental disconnect between people and government, which has not been addressed by the formation of formal democratic institutions.

In spite of these factors however, there is a clear and widespread desire for a public role in the political process in the three provinces studied. The ideal of democratic participation and self-determination of government is still held in high regard. This may seem unbelievable in the aftermath of the 2009 elections, now notorious for low voter turnout and fraud allegations. But people’s *desire* to take part in choosing their government cannot be measured by turnout for an election in which outcomes were widely considered pre-determined, and in which for many, voting was a life-threatening exercise. Indeed, for many Afghans these elections did not represent a “test” of democracy or democratic principles at all. A number of those interviewed for this study expressed the belief that the development of democratic systems of government takes time, and that this process cannot be implemented quickly. This would be a useful point of consideration for members of the international community who would seek to portray elections in 2009 as the be-all and end-all of democratic governance in the country. Democracy and democratisation in Afghanistan will be lengthy and volatile but valuable processes, which urgently need redefining according to Afghan perspectives.

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