Noref Policy Brief

Afghanistan's religious landscape: politicising the sacred

Kaja Borchgrevink and Kristian Berg Harpviken

Executive Summary

Afghanistan's thirty years of war have seen the gradual and heavy politicisation of religion. A number of new and distinct types of political move-ments – which can be characterised broadly as "fundamentalists", "Islamists" and "neo-fundamentalists" – has emerged to challenge traditional expressions of Islam. This has transformed the religious landscape in Afghanistan, which is as a result more variegated than ever before. The differ-ent attitudes of these new currents to questions of religious authority, political process, and the Afghan statebuilding project need to be carefully distin-guished. More generally, the appearance of such movements highlights the way that the role of reli-gion, though often overlooked, is central to the attempt since the regime-change of late 2001 to build a viable Afghan state. The impact of the new actors (including the Taliban itself) is reflected in the way that President Hamid Karzai – struggling to balance the modernised secularists supporting the statebuilding project and the religious fundamental-ists opposing it – has allowed several *ex-jihadi* Islamist factions into the government. The result of this accommodation has been both to sustain the former *jihadi* leaders' influence and contribute to the marginalisation of more moderate Islamic forces. At the same time, many religious leaders believe they could contribute positively to the statebuilding agenda by generating support among Afghan people. This complex situation makes an understanding of Afghanistan's diverse religious landscape and the various positions vis-à-vis the state all the more essential in the context of efforts to develop strategies for peace and reconciliation.

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Background[1]

Throughout Afghanistan's three decades of war, religion has been heavily politicised. In the aftermath of 9/11 and the fall of the Taliban regime, Afghan Islam was easily confused with political extremism, even al-Qaeda-style global terror. For most Afghans, Islam is much more than politics. Religion is part of everyday life. Islam is what 99% of all Afghans have in common. The Sunni Muslims constitute some four-fifths of the population and will be the main focus of this analysis. The remaining one-fifth is largely "twelver" Shia, who will be discussed only briefly here. The religious landscape is diverse. What it means to be Muslim and what role religion should have in public life are contentious issues. This makes the role of religion central to the Afghan statebuilding project.

Many actors have since the regime-change of November 2001 taken part in the contest over defining the relationship between religion and the state. In broad terms, four such actors can be identified:

- Inside the government, a modern, technocratic elite that is driving the foreign-sponsored statebuilding project; it favours a limited role for religion in the public space
- Also inside the government, but at odds with the first group, the still factionalised ex-*jihadi* Islamist political leadership, which promotes and protects the Islamic state
- Outside and opposing the government, militant Islamist and fundamentalist groups, including the Taliban and *Hizb-e-Islami*
- A variety of apolitical religious actors, supporting neither the government nor the militants.

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1   This policy brief combines a number of different primary and secondary sources including interviews with religious actors in Afghanistan, Afghan religious websites, and academic writing, as well as "grey" literature available on the topic. It draws particularly on the following studies: Kaja Borchgrevink and Kristian Berg Harpviken, "Trans-border Religious Networks: The Case of Religious Education in Afghanistan and Pakistan", forthcoming, 2010; Astri Suhrke, Torunn Wimpelmann Chaudhary, Aziz Hakimi, Kristian Berg Harpviken and Arne Strand, "Reconciliatory Approaches to the Insurgency in Afghanistan, An Overview", Bergen, Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), 2009, http://www.cmi.no/publications/file/3266-conciliatory-approaches-to-the-insurgency-in.pdf, accessed 26 February 2010; Kaja Borchgrevink, "Religious Civil Society in Afghanistan", Oslo, PRIO, 2007; and Kristian Berg Harpviken, The Hazara of Afghanistan: The thorny path towards political unity, 1978 – 1992, Oslo, University of Oslo, 1997.

Traditional Islam

Traditionally, Islam in Afghanistan has been an amalgamation of formal Islam, Sufism, and customary practices (the last category sometimes referred to as "folk Islam"). While no fixed hierarchy exists amongst Sunni religious leaders, a broad distinction can be made between the *mullah imam* (the local mosque leader, who interprets and extends the religion as it is experienced in daily life); and the *ulema* (high-level religious scholars, who act as the interpreters and upholders of the religion's law and scriptural tradition).

The *ulema* are formally educated religious leaders schooled in *madrasas* and in the religious faculties of universities, and are often organised in loose networks around religious leaders, mosques and *madrasas* themselves. The traditional *ulema* have not played a directly political role, but have primarily provided practical and spiritual guidance to their followers. Formal Islam is a legal code and the *ulema* were originally established as a class of religious specialists. With the development of Islamic jurisprudence, the *ulema* consolidated their position as interpreters of Sharia (Islamic law).

Sufism – the esoteric tradition in Islam – is also well established in Afghanistan. It coexists with formal Islam, and many of the formally trained traditionalist clergy are also attached to a Sufi order. In contrast to the formally trained *ulema*, being a Sufi master (*pir*) is hereditary, and the tombs of Sufi masters are important places of worship and pilgrimage. The Sufis are organised in orders (*tariqas*), but it is the relationship between the *pir* and the disciple (*murid*) that is central to the personal spiritual journey. The phenomenon of "followership" is widespread, particularly among the middle class. Two of the main Sufi orders – the Nakshbandiyya and Qadiriyya – are closely linked the Mujaddedi and Gilani families and their respective political parties. The Sufi leadership sees itself as upholder and protector of Afghan and Islamic values, culture and practices.

Religious leaders and statebuilding

The main religious actors and institutions in Afghanistan, the religious leaders, the mosques and the *madrasas*, are not organised in formal structures, but form part of looser networks. They are primarily reactive in their mode of operation. These institutions have central positions in Afghan society, providing theological and spiritual guidance. Their influence lies in their moral authority, based on their knowledge and interpretation of religious texts, mystical association and holy lineage, rather than their political associations or military power.[2] Several religious actors retain considerable influence on the moral values, social practices and political opinions of many Afghans.

The traditionalist religious leaders who reject the Taliban have, after the regime-change in 2001, increasingly reverted to their mosques and *madrasas*, quietly fulfilling their duties as religious leaders and spiritual guides. The potential of religious actors as agents of social change is, in part, being acknowledged by the Afghan government, other international governments and civil-society groups. Being apolitical, however, these religious actors are not commonly seen as actors in the statebuilding project. The voice of the clergy is used to legitimise development policies and programmes, or to gain access to "project beneficiaries". Little effort goes into safeguarding a space for the involvement of religious actors. Many religious leaders believe they could positively contribute to the statebuilding agenda by generating support among the people, as well as through more direct participation in reconstruction and development.

> Many religious leaders could contribute to statebuilding by generating popular support.
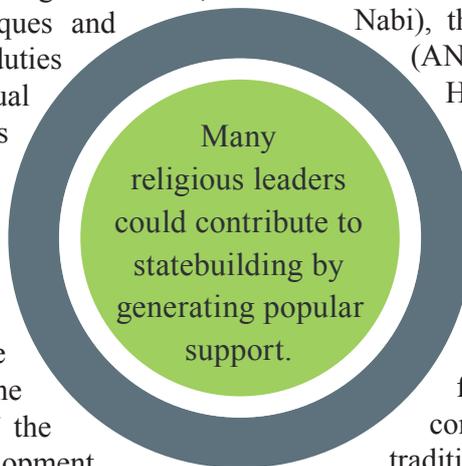
Religion and politics

The religious landscape in Afghanistan continued to be dominated by various traditional authorities until well past the mid-20th century. Then new ideological currents started to emerge, and these in turn were reinforced by the Afghan *jihad* (the common shorthand term for the resistance to the Soviet-backed communist regime which had come to power in 1978). The result was a complete change in the relationship between religion and politics in the country, which has now lasted for over thirty years. This transformation can be summarised as a challenge to traditional expressions of Islam from three new and distinct types of political movements: "fundamentalists", "Islamists" and "neo-fundamentalists".[3]

After the communist takeover in 1978, the traditionalist Islamic groups mobilised through the mullah and Sufi networks, and joined the religiously-based opposition building up across the border in the Pakistani city of Peshawar. However, the main traditionalist parties - the *Haraqat-e Inqelab* (led by Maulana Mohammad Nabi), the Afghan National Liberation Front (ANLF, led by the Sufi-associated Hazrat Sigbatullah Mojadeddi), and the National Islamic Front of Afghanistan (led by Sufi leader Pir Gilani) - received a smaller share of international support than the fundamentalist movements.

After the withdrawal of the Soviet forces (1989) and the fall of the communist government (1992), the traditionalist *mujahedin* withdrew to their villages, mosques and *madrasas*. In the mid-1990s, part of the originally traditionalist *madrasa* networks – influenced by more fundamentalist ideologies – mobilised as the "Taliban" (students of Islam). The Taliban quickly gained ground, challenging a conflict-riven *mujahedin* government in Kabul and largely anarchic warlord rule in the rest of the country. In autumn 1996, the Taliban took Kabul.

The Taliban regime enhanced the status of the traditional religious institutions and leaders. But it did not tolerate diverging interpretations of Islam, and the religious opposition was threatened; some of its

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2   For an in-depth analysis of the relationship between Islam and politics in Afghanistan through modern Afghan history, see Asta Olesen, Islam and Politics in Afghanistan, London, Curzon, 1995.

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3   This typology draws on the work of Olivier Roy, which still presents one of the most useful analyses of Islam in Afghanistan. See Olivier Roy, Afghanistan: From Holy War to Civil War, Princeton, NJ, Darwin Press, 1995; and also on the more recent work of Yahya Sadowski, see Annual Review of Political Science, vol 9, 1996, pp 215-240, http://arjournals.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev.polisci.9.070204.083812?cookieSet=1&journalCode=polisci , accessed 26 February 2010.

members were killed, others went underground. After the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, the traditionalist parties once again became part of the political process, but with little or no influence. The *Harakat-e Inqelab* (which had lost most of its members to the Taliban in the 1990s) almost disappeared after the death of its leader in 2001; and Mujaddedi's ANLF remains a one-man show.

Fundamentalists

The term "Islamic fundamentalism" refers to various reformist movements that reject both syncretistic practices and modern interpretations of Islam, and aim to return to the true tenets of Islam as practiced at the time of the Prophet Mohammed. The fundamentalists are not a unified group, but include factions that permit certain esoteric practices and veneration of shrines, such as the south Asian Barelvi and Deobandi, and more scriptural orthodox groups wanting to rid Islam of mystical and cultural practices, such as the Saudi-inspired Wahabi and the south Asian *Ahl-e-Hadith* schools of thought. Deobandi and Wahabi inspirations, in particular, contributed to a radicalisation among Afghan traditionalist and fundamentalist groups in the 1980s and 1990s, forging strong ties to *madrasas* and political parties in Pakistan and to groups in Saudi Arabia.[4]

The Taliban of the 1990s represented a true fundamentalist movement. The conditions of chaos, corruption and lawlessness in which it emerged meant that the Taliban was initially welcomed by many Afghans. The Taliban was rooted in the Deobandi fundamentalist *madrasa* networks of the Afghan-Pakistani border lands, but transcended these through its strict fundamentalist interpretation and implementation of Islam. In 1996, it installed an Islamic state, banned secular and traditional law, and introduced a strict interpretation of *Sharia*.

The Taliban regime represented a minimalist state, with no interest in welfare. The focus was on enforcing Islamic law, with special emphasis on the practices of dress, behaviour and ritual.[5] The regime brutally punished any violation of its rules, with the result that its initial popularity among the population faded rapidly. Nonetheless, by the time of the United States-led invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, the Taliban controlled some 90% of the country's territory.

Neither the Taliban nor other groups representing similar political currents were part of the peace negotiations that took place in the Bonn conference in December 2001, and fundamentalist groups were largely excluded from the subsequent political process. Yet prominent former Taliban, such as *Da Khuddam ul-Furkan Jam'iat* (Society of the Servants of Providence) and *De Afghanistan Madani Islami Milli Tanzeem* (Civil Islamic National Organisation of Afghanistan, have attempted to claim a stake in the political process[6], without any of their initiatives being met by a sustained government response.

The Islamists

The emergence of political Islam in the 1960s altered the relationship between religion and politics in Afghanistan. The Islamists broke with traditionalist and fundamentalist Islamic ideals of the true Islam found at the time of the Prophet and rearticulated Islam as a modern ideology promoting both piety and progress. The inspiration came from Islamist movements in Egypt, Pakistan and Iran which had introduced a systematic ideology and a global pan-Islamist agenda. The Afghan Islamist parties recruited from secular universities rather than religious seminaries. The Islamists constituted a modernised elite who disregarded clerical authorities and placed the emphasis on political leadership.

The main Afghan Islamist parties – the *Jamat-e-Islami* (led by Burhanuddin Rabbani); *Hizb-e-Islami* (represented by two distinct factions, led respectively by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Maulawi Yunus Khales); and *Ittehad-e-Islami* (led by Abd al-Rabb al-Rasul Sayyaf) – were well connected to Islamist parties and patrons abroad. The Islamists set out to make Afghanistan an ideal Islamic society through

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4   See Mariam Abou Zahab and Olivier Roy, Islamist Networks: The Afghan-Pakistan Connection, New York, Colombia University Press, 2004.

5   Ahmed Rashid, The Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia, London, IB Tauris, 2000, gives a comprehensive account of the development of the Taliban in the 1990s.

6   See Ruttig, Islamists, leftists – and a void in the center. Afghanistan's political parties and where they come from (1902-2006), Berlin, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2006, http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_9674-544-2-30.pdf , accessed 23 February 2010.

reform, and initially were not inclined towards the use of violence. But the occupation of Afghanistan by a "foreign infidel force" in the shape of the Soviet army, however, necessitated the call for armed *jihad*.

The Islamists – Hekmatyar's group in particular – were the main recipients of financial and military aid to the Afghan resistance in the 1980s and 1990s and grew into hierarchically structured political and military organisations. They were, however, highly factionalised, unable to create a functioning political coalition, and ended up fighting each other in Kabul from 1992. After they lost Kabul to the Taliban in 1996, the *jihadi* parties (both Sunni and Shia) reunited in the Northern Alliance in 1997.

Afghan Islamists have few ideologues and have not defined what an Islamic state is.

The Afghan Islamists have had few ideologues of their own; little emphasis has been placed on defining what exactly an Islamic state should be, apart from its foundation on *Sharia*. In practice, their Islamist politics has been reduced to certain Islamic symbols and practices, and a pan-Islamic vision been replaced by a narrower Islamo-nationalist agenda. In addition, party programmes have played a small role; party leaders and their history are more important. Many of the ex-*jihadi* leaders still possess arms, control great resources and have secured influential positions within the new government.

The Islamists successfully ensured the passage of the 2004 constitution, according to which Afghanistan became an Islamic republic in which *Sharia* takes precedence over both secular and traditional law. The ex-*jihadi* leaders, criticised for war crimes and human-rights abuses during the conflict, have also thwarted all attempts to try them. At the same time, the Islamists have in the course of efforts to reshape themselves as political parties failed to establish a functioning bloc, often due to competing claims for leadership positions.

Some Islamists are outside the government. They include various factions of *Hizb-e-Islami*: Hekmatyar's group (which was excluded from the Bonn process and joined the armed opposition to the new authorities in

Kabul); Khales's group, which under the leadership of Maulavi Jalaluddin Haqqani associated with the Taliban; and the faction led by Khaled Farooqi, which (allegedly) broke with Hekmatyar in 2004 and pledged support to the political process.

Indeed, many former *Hizb-e-Islami* commanders supported Hamid Karzai in the 2004 presidential election and were offered key positions in Kabul and the provincial administration. The party also has a substantial faction in parliament. But many analysts question whether the split within *Hizb-e-Islami* that appears to separate Gulbuddin Hekmatyar from the rest is decisive, and some see the party's strong representation in the government as a potential threat.[7]
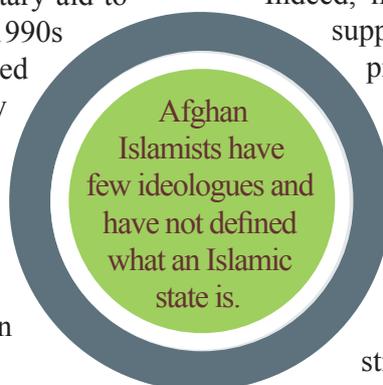
The neo-fundamentalists

The Taliban that has evolved since the fall of Kabul in November 2001 has been described as a "neo-fundamentalist" movement. The neo-fundamentalists, influenced by Arab Wahabism and the global Salafi ideas of al-Qaeda, have grown out of international fundamentalist networks and represent a mix of fundamentalist-type conservative values and radical actions. Only days after the Taliban were forced to flee Kabul in 2001, the first calls were made for *jihad* against the latest "foreign infidel forces".

The Taliban that gradually reappeared is more sophisticated than its predecessor, not least in its military tactics and information strategies. Its new military tactics – especially in the form of suicide attacks – overwhelmingly hit civilians and generate massive fear. Many within the clergy reject suicide-attacks on theological grounds, and Afghanistan is yet to see "suicide cults" that commemorate the "martyrs" of such attacks (of a kind familiar in Palestine, and increasingly in Pakistan). This can of course change.

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7   See Ruttig, Islamists, leftists – and a void in the center, 2006

The Taliban has proved quick to adapt to new realities and to learn from experience elsewhere. The alliance with al-Qaeda that caused the Taliban's fall from power in 2001 has since been deepened; even though al-Qaeda's global *jihadist* agenda – one that of its nature transcends Afghanistan's borders – is not widely supported by the Afghan Taliban. Few Afghans are known to have joined al-Qaeda or other groups possessed of a global vision, and the Afghan Taliban has a clear national ambition.

The main priority is still on re-establishing the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, with Mullah Omar as the *Amir al-Mu'minin* ("commander of the faithful") and the introduction of *Sharia* and obedience to Islamic law. The Taliban's own ideology seems unrefined, but it draws on a well articulated and widely publicised *jihad* rhetoric which it communicates through TV and radio, via threatening "night letters", and with SMS, MMS and the internet to call for *jihad* and report its latest successes.

On the ground in Afghanistan, several factors fuel the insurgency – among them a lack of security and development, poor performance by the government, and anger at the civilian casualties caused by international forces. The Taliban, once it establishes control of a particular area, can often extend its control by penalising those seen to collaborate with the government; in the new circumstances, many local people who balance the various factors may now find it preferable to join the Taliban.

Both the Taliban and *Hizb-e-Islami* also have solid ties to radical groups in Pakistan. The Pakistani *madrasas* played an important role in recruitment and mobilisation in the 1980s and 1990s, and certain *madrasas* there continue to act as recruiting-agents and to spread radical ideas. Networks of radical Deobandi *madrasas* in the frontier region – such as those linked to the Haqqani network in Waziristan – are especially involved in the recruitment and training of militants.

> The Taliban's tactics, especially suicide attacks, hit civilians and generate massive fear.

Islamic moderates

Islamic moderates can be characterised as those that support the statebuilding process, reject violent *jihad* and advocate an interpretation of Islam that (while still respecting Afghan traditions and religion) is compatible with women's rights and human rights. Such people and groups lost out in Afghanistan after 2001 as President Karzai – struggling to balance modernised secularists who back the statebuilding project and religious fundamentalists opposed to it – has included several ex-*jihadi* Islamist factions in the government.

The space for moderate Islamic voices was further limited by the way that armed *jihadi* factions registered as political parties and thus helped dominate a political scene which became divided between (on one side) the ex-*jihadi* parties and (on the other) the secularist parties (which included the remnants of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan [PDPA], ethno-nationalists and new democrats). The space in the middle of this political spectrum, which could in principle have been filled by moderate Islamic groups (such as the tribal-Islamic monarchist National Unity Movement of Afghanistan, perhaps in alliance with secular democrats) was squeezed out after the constitutional *Loya Jirga* in 2004. It remains empty.

In some respects Karzai does represent a moderate Islamic project within the government. He resembles Afghan rulers before him in using Islam as a legitimising factor in politics, for example by calling on the Muslim *umma* (community of believers) to stop the violent insurgency. Ironically, Islamic moderates are favoured by western donors. However, Karzai's vision of a moderate Islamic state is recognised neither by the Islamists nor the Islamic traditionalists, and he and his supporters lack religious authority where it counts.
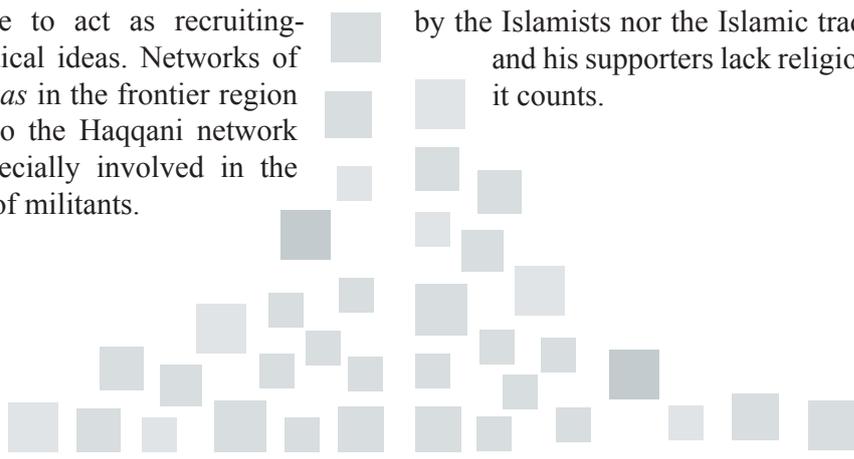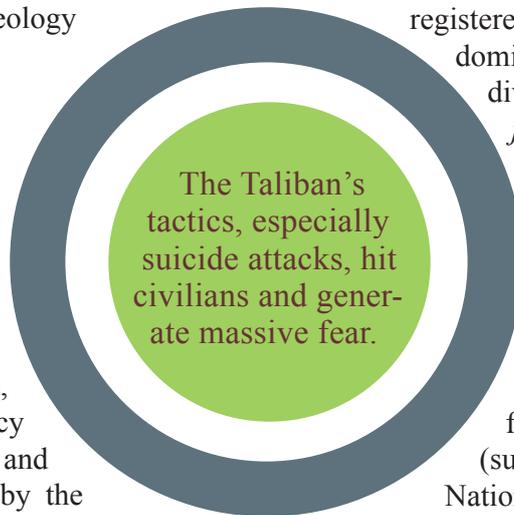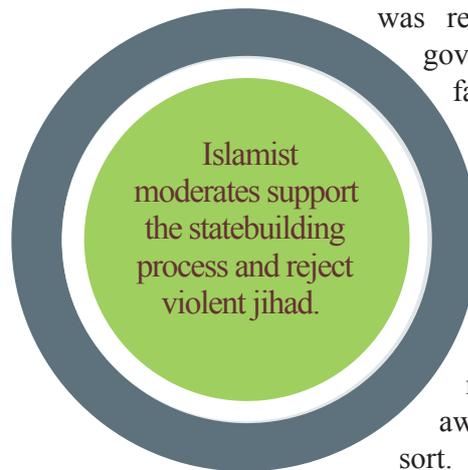
The Shias

The Afghan Shia, the majority of whom belong to the Hazara ethnic group, form a distinct religious community both in terms of their social organisation and their role in Afghan politics. Traditionally, the functioning religious authority in the rural Hazara communities has belonged to the *sayyid* - that is, people believed to descend directly from the Prophet and thus *karamat* (bearers of miracles). Over the past three decades of war, the authority of the *sayyid* has been challenged by a rapidly growing echelon of trained religious clergy, many of them schooled in the main educational institutions in Iraq (before 1979) or Iran (from 1979 onwards). While the *sayyid* still have considerable influence at a community level, they have lost much of their previous political role as this latter group has come to the fore.

The broad division among the Shia mirrors that found among the Sunnis in also being between traditionalists and Islamists. There are differences of detail, however, that reflect the wider religious schism between the two branches of Islam. As a religious minority, the Afghan Shia have always been oriented outside the country, where the main authorities and educational centres were to be found. Among the Shia clergy, there is a firm hierarchical structure, in contrast to the looser networks of followers amongst the Sunni. In principle, every Shia believer must follow a *mujtahid* (a spiritual guide, a person well versed in Islam).

The new role of the trained clergy was inspired by Islamism in general, and by the Iranian revolution of 1979 in particular. Throughout the 1980s, Iran supported a number of radical Islamist Shia groups. By 1989, with strong Iranian encouragement, the nine major groups with a Shia and/or Hazara foundation coalesced into the *Hizb-e-Wahdat* (Unity Party). This party signified an entirely new level of influence for a minority population, as it gained solid representation both in the *mujahedin* government of the early 1990s and the post-2001 administration. Internally, however, the party has been torn between a Shia Islamist political vision and a Hazara ethnicist one, and it is now split into multiple factions.

A core demand among the Shia political groups has been equality for the Shia (in religion, law and politics) in a context where many disputes arise over the question of the application of laws to the community. Under the 2004 constitution, the Jafari school of law was recognised as the governing one for family issues among the Shia.

Islamist moderates support the statebuilding process and reject violent jihad.

The Islamist influence on politics among the Shia does not seem to reflect a religious awakening of any sort. Yet, the Shia clergy stand far from various types of Sunni fundamentalism, for which there is no equivalent in Afghan Shiism. The consequences are felt in the field of education, where the high-level training offered in a range of disciplines by Shia educational institutions abroad means that the clergy at home take an active role in promoting education (both religious and conventional). Ultimately, however, the power of Islamism has entailed a massive cost in repression and bloodshed, and despite its role in promoting Shia rights there is limited support for Islamism among the majority of Shia.
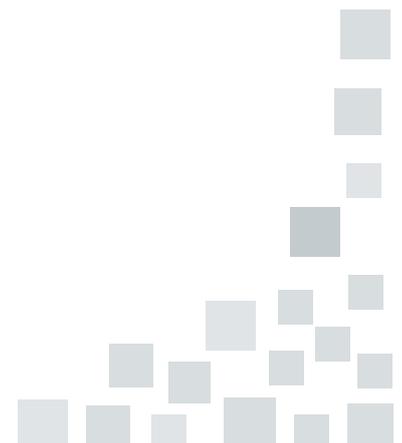
Opportunities and challenges

The concluding section of this policy brief considers the implications of this rough map of Afghanistan's religious landscape for the present and future of the interface between religion and politics. In particular, three questions arise:

- Can a call for reconciliation with the insurgents be expected to bear fruit?
- What are the inherent tensions in the government related to politicised religion?
- What are the prospects for a broader alliance between the government and moderate Islamic groups?

Reconciliation with the armed opposition

The government and its international supporters insist that the door to reconciliation with armed insurgents is always open, conditioned on a threefold willingness: to lay down arms, endorse the Afghan constitution, and enter into regular politics. But any such process has faced obstacles. The government's readiness to engage defectors from the Taliban, which could have had considerable appeal for many of those now enrolled with the armed opposition, has in practice proven limited. The National Reconciliation Commission set out to persuade mid-level Taliban commanders and their followers to give up fighting and join the political process.

> The government's readiness to engage Taliban defectors has in practice proven limited.

But this initiative has been sharply criticised on two grounds. First, it reaches no higher than mid-level commanders. Second, and more fundamentally, this approach to reconciliation – which demands that individuals give up arms and integrate into a new political order – does not offer them enough in terms of a share of power (though admittedly the offer of power-sharing with fundamentalist militants who have a national vision and ambitions for spreading a definite ideological or religious agenda would be challenging). But the hard question is: can the use of armed force against a significant part of Afghanistan's population be justified without offering it an alternative political avenue?

The insurgents are intransigent on their own account in setting two main conditions for negotiations: the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan and Hamid Karzai's resignation from the presidency

(or at least a commitment to a timetable for these steps). At this point the positions of the two sides in the conflict are beyond compromise. In the meantime, the neo-fundamentalist Taliban leadership is turning increasingly militant, radical and irreconcilable. It is also tightening its control over the organisation and moving closer to al-Qaeda.

Tensions in the government alliance

The Afghan government is a strange alliance between technocrat-modernists with a moderate Islamic (or secular) orientation, and staunch Islamists. The two groups share the vision of a strong state committed to multifaceted modernisation but diverge widely on all questions that have to do with religion and the state. This creates deep tensions both within the government, and between it and its international backers. The unfortunate result is that this compromise both in itself carries considerable costs and does little to accommodate the significant sections of the population who – whether on traditionalist, Islamist or neo-fundamentalist grounds – see the government as a threat to religion.

For the armed opposition, President Karzai is not the key concern. The true opposition to the Taliban and *Hizb-e-Islami* is the old Afghan *jihadi* leaders, currently well situated inside the government. Any power-sharing between the government and the Taliban and *Hizb-e-Islami* would involve concessions to the latter that would alienate ex-*jihadis* who were fighting these groups in the 1990s and who still consider them their main enemy. By contrast, the ideological differences between Islamic actors inside and outside the government are less significant. Their respective positions today are largely a result of whether or not they have been able to network and build alliances since 2001. The lack of an inclusive political process has marginalised certain actors and reinforced the position of others.

Alienating the moderates

After the regime-change in 2001, Afghanistan's new power-holders gave priority to short-term stability at the cost of longer-term statebuilding. This approach informed the alliances that were built with the ex-*jihadi* party leaders, warlords and commanders, all of which entailed considerable costs for the government's

legitimacy (and gains for the insurgents). An alternative path designed to minimise the risk of conflict with old warlords would have been to offer them a place in the democratic political process. Instead, efforts to build viable political organisations were discouraged. For example, the application of the so-called Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) system for Afghan elections – under which political parties were banned from standing for elections – discouraged the building of strong, internally democratic political parties.

The reliance of Karzai and his international supporters on alliances with the ex-*jihadi* leaders has both sustained the latter's influence and contributed to the marginalisation of more moderate Islamic forces. These include various apolitical religious actors who are neither supportive of radical Islamic groups nor sympathetic to the government or its ex-*jihadi* associates. Many of these moderate religious leaders have been drawn in to the conflict, with tragic consequences. Militants kill individuals who lend religious legitimation to the government, whom they stamp as defectors. Mosques have been bombed.

The government is unable to offer protection. Indeed, religious leaders accused of being aligned with anti-government groups have been rounded up and abused by the government. All this creates a dynamic which forces religious leaders to keep a low profile, or join the militant opposition. In this situation the space for moderate religious voices is limited and presents few opportunities for them to contribute constructively to the statebuilding project.

Further reading

1. Gilles Dorronsoro, "The Taliban's Winning Strategy in Afghanistan", Washington DC, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2009, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/taliban_winning_strategy.pdf, accessed 23 February 2010.

2. Antonio Giustozzi, ed, *Decoding the New Taliban*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2009.

3. Tomas Ruttig, *Islamists, leftists – and a void in the center. Afghanistan's political parties and where they come from (1902-2006)*, Berlin, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2006, http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_9674-544-2-30.pdf, accessed 23 February 2010.

4. Michael Semple, *Reconciliation in Afghanistan*, Washington, United States Institute of Peace, 2009.