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Warlords As Bureaucrats:

The Afghan Experience

Dipali Mukhopadhyay

Organically derived, internally legitimate democracy does not emerge as a function of foreign interference and the imposition of "good governance."

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Mukhopadhyay is writing her dissertation on state building and provincial governance in Afghanistan, particularly on the role of warlord commanders-turned-provincial governors. She has conducted nearly 150 interviews in Kabul, as well as in northern and eastern Afghanistan, having spent several months in-country in 2007 and 2008. She also served as a consultant to the Agha Khan Development Network in summer 2004 in the northeastern province of Badakhshan, where she conducted conflict analysis training and research on the drug economy.

Mukhopadhyay has been invited to speak about her research by Washington's Center for Strategic and International Studies, Oslo's Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, and Istanbul's Swedish Research Institute. In January 2009, *US News and World Report* published an op-ed on civil-military relations that she co-authored with Antonia H. Chayes.

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Summary

Despite his commitment to develop a democratic, modern state, President Hamid Karzai placed many former warlords in positions of power, particularly in the provinces. Many observers, Afghan and foreign alike, have decried the inclusion of warlords in the new governmental structures as the chief corrosive agent undermining efforts to reconstruct the state. Indeed, warlord governors have not been ideal government officials. They have employed informal power and rules, as well as their personal networks, to preserve control over their respective provinces. Informalized politics of this kind is the antithesis of a technocratic, rule-based approach to governance and entails considerable costs, from inefficiency to corruption and human rights abuses.

Nevertheless, some warlord-governors have proven quite successful in areas ranging from security and reconstruction to counternarcotics, as the two discussed in this paper, Atta Mohammed Noor and Gul Agha Sherzai, show. Warlord governance in Afghanistan has involved a messy mix of unsteady formal institutions and powerful informal rules and organizations, but it has proven effective in some cases. The performances of these two warlord-governors have been consistently cited as exceptional amid a largely unimpressive group of provincial governors nationwide.

The experience of Afghanistan and many other states as well as the limited resources available for international state-building efforts suggest that for many historically weak states, a hybrid model of governance that draws on a mix of formal institutions and informal power may be the only viable one. The relative success of the model in some parts of the country demonstrates that the choice in Afghanistan need not be between building a representative, democratic state and allowing anarchic tribalism to take hold. While less than optimal, the hybrid model has proven that it can deliver some goods and services to the population, the central government, and the international community. Given Afghanistan's history of weak central power and its limited resources, the form of governance represented by warlord-governors may be the best compromise at present in Afghanistan.

The United States and its allies framed their goal in Afghanistan after 2001 as the cultivation of a capable state that could govern the country's affairs by the rule of law rather than the gun and deliver an unprecedented array of goods and services to its citizens. In reality, Presidents George W. Bush and Hamid Karzai adopted an approach that relied on former warlords to advance a number of high priority agendas, from security and reconstruction to counternarcotics and counterinsurgency. Moreover, states in the international community chose not to field a major enforcement presence to fill the security vacuum after the fall of the Taliban; as a result, warlordism's grip on Afghanistan's periphery grew stronger.

Many observers, Afghan and foreign alike, have pointed to these commanders and their brand of politics as the chief corrosive agent in the post-2001 state. While warlord governors have not been ideal government officials, the two discussed in this paper, Atta Mohammed Noor and Gul Agha Sherzai, have proven quite successful in areas ranging from security and reconstruction to counternarcotics. Warlord governance in Afghanistan has involved a messy mix of unsteady formal institutions, influenced if not dominated by powerful informal rules and organizations, but it has proven effective in some cases. The performances of these two warlord-governors have been consistently cited as exceptional amid a largely unimpressive group of provincial governors nationwide.

The experience of Afghanistan and many other states, as well as the limited resources available for international state-building efforts, suggest that for many historically weak states a hybrid model of governance that draws on a mix of formal institutions and informal power may be the only viable one. The relative success of the model in some parts of the country demonstrates that the choice in Afghanistan need not be between building a representative, democratic state and allowing anarchic tribalism to take hold. While less than optimal, the hybrid model has proven that it can deliver some goods and services to the population, the central government, and the international community. Given Afghanistan's history of weak central power and its limited resources, the form of governance represented by warlord-governors may be the best compromise at present in Afghanistan.

An Overambitious Reconstruction Model

While the international community, in the words of United Nations Special Representative Lakhdar Brahimi, took a "light footprint"[1] approach in Afghanistan, the end goal remained a formidable one, namely the construction of a credible and capable Afghan state. Those involved with and advising the intervention recognized the challenges at hand, but still advocated on behalf of a fairly ambitious and widely accepted project to reinvent the relationship between the Afghan state and its citizens. The design of the post-2001 state called

for a state that would be expected to perform an extensive set of functions as the principal governing agent in the lives of its citizens.

The road map for rebuilding the state in Afghanistan derived from the maximalist model of postconflict reconstruction that had emerged during the 1990s, based on lessons learned by the international community through interventions in sub-Saharan Africa, the Balkans, and East Timor. The model called for democratic elections and economic liberalization as the cornerstones of healthy statehood. Soon new requirements were added to the model, namely the building of strong institutions of governance based on the rule of law, civil and political rights, and institutional checks and balances.

This kind of intervention aims to transform the fundamental ways in which a state governs its citizens. At its core, institution building amounts to realizing a "vision of social progress" that requires a dramatic and rapid rise in the capacity of institutions within the state, the market, and the society.[2] This well-developed formula for state reconstruction has not transformed political realities on the ground, in part because of the deficient will and commitment of intervening countries. But, as important, deep systemic and structural problems that lead countries to war or collapse have proven difficult to correct quickly, if at all. Moreover, the means and ends of postconflict state building are arguably out of sync: organically derived, internally legitimate democracy does not emerge as a function of foreign interference and the imposition of "good governance."

The 2001 Bonn Agreement represented the latest reincarnation of this ambitious model. Select Afghan elites, shepherded by the UN and the United States, gathered in Bonn after the Taliban regime's collapse to produce this document. They put forth a far-reaching set of aspirations for the Afghan state and a road map for how to achieve them. The agreement called for a new constitution, "free and fair elections," an independent judiciary, a centrally controlled security sector, and an institutional commitment to protecting the rights of women, religious groups, and all ethnicities within the country.

But the gap between the demands of the model and the reality in Afghanistan was too wide for reconstruction to go according to plan. Despite the ratification of a constitution, followed by presidential and parliamentary elections in 2004 and 2005, peace and stability remained elusive. The international community reconvened with the Afghan leadership in 2006 to redefine its efforts. The Afghan Compact they produced was an even more ambitious document than the Bonn Agreement. It outlined an interconnected set of state-building activities to bring about "security, governance, rule of law, human rights, economic and social development" to the Afghan people. The document put forward a comprehensive list of tasks to be taken on by the state in a matter of years, sometimes even months. These tasks were ambitious and would require extraordinary progress in a host of competencies, most of which the Afghan state had never before achieved.

The compact was followed by a massive consultation process that yielded the National Development Strategy (ANDS). The 2008 ANDS—technically a document intended to propose a World Bank–mandated poverty reduction strategy—acknowledged the numerous obstacles to state consolidation, from "parallel structures" and "weak public sector institutions" to "weak parliamentary oversight" and a "poorly defined justice system." It forged ahead, nonetheless, with a detailed road map for transforming the Afghan state into a collection of competent, representative, responsive, and coordinated formal institutions that would link the capital to the countryside. The strategy rested on the assumption that the Bonn Agreement, the 2004 constitution, and subsequent presidential and parliamentary elections had put the country on a path to "democratic self-governance."

All strategic documents that framed the post-conflict state-building process underscored the imperative to create a representative state with a strong center that could credibly govern throughout the country. The Afghan state, while historically centralized in name, had consistently failed to govern much beyond the capital. Advocacy for centralized statehood by scholars and practitioners alike hinged on the notion that Afghanistan should combat its centrifugal political tendencies and consolidate at this critical juncture. Large segments of the Afghan citizenry reportedly wished to live under a strong, centralized government that would prevent the kind of fractious and anarchic politics that had marked the warlord period of the 1990s. Decentralization in the absence of strong state institutions in Kabul, it was argued, would give free reign to destructive forces at the periphery and prevent the state from providing for its citizenry in credible terms.

The international community, the Afghan government, and the Afghan people seem to have been, at least ostensibly, aligned in their desire for a robust, centralized, and representative state. The view from the ground nearly eight years later suggests, however, that the Afghan state has failed to achieve the degree of penetration, let alone legitimacy, envisioned: Why and what does this mean for the way ahead?

Adapting to Reality

The reality on the ground departed from the model envisioned for two main reasons: the character of the Afghan state and the security imperative that motivated intervention in the first place.

The State in Afghanistan: A Look Back

A retrospective look at Afghan statehood reveals the extraordinary challenges involved in establishing a strong and capable government. It also reflects the persistent salience of informal actors—religious, tribal, and militant—whose place in the landscape is not reflected in the current model of post-conflict state

building, despite their prominent role in politics throughout Afghan history. Those Afghan rulers who attempted to rapidly introduce models of strong, direct rule, whether democratic or dictatorial, consistently found themselves without sufficient political support from the periphery. Abdal Rahman Khan, the first real Afghan state builder, set out to create a centralized state in the late nineteenth century, drawing on Islamic legitimacy in order to establish direct rule. His strategies were successful because they involved brute force and violence, instruments unavailable to modern-day peace builders.

In the 1920s, Abdal Rahman's grandson, King Amanullah, also sought to redefine the relationship between the state and society, this time in highly modern terms. He instituted reforms that delineated citizenship, nationality, and the rule of law in order to make real the link between the capital and the rest of the country. The PDPA communist regime of the late 1970s most radically reframed the Afghan state, inserting itself into the social, economic, and family lives of the Afghan people in unprecedented fashion. Both Amanullah and the communists eventually met with extraordinary resistance from peripheral elites as well as ordinary citizens. The reaction to the communist regime and the subsequent Soviet invasion resulted in a profound crisis for the state-society relationship and an eventual plunge into decades of civil war.

Most historic recollections of the state in Afghanistan focus on these highly turbulent periods of ambitious state building. But the mid-twentieth century involved several decades of rule by the Musahiban kings, whose approach to governing involved fairly limited intrusion on the part of the central state into the lives of its citizens. These rulers had witnessed the radical and costly state-building approach of their predecessor, Amanullah, and chose a different set of strategies. Nadir Shah, his brothers and, eventually, his son, Zahir Shah, pursued a limited state-building strategy, one that kept the state's role in the realm of conflict management, dispute resolution, and other matters of social or private concern minimal. Direct taxation and troop conscription, two of the more intrusive instruments of the state, either vanished or were mediated by local power holders. The state's legitimacy as a governing agent involved the following set of essential, but limited, activities: "keep the peace, administer justice, see that conscription went smoothly, and collect small amounts of taxes."[3] Afghan communities kept control over and set limits on the state's role in their lives, and informal power holders maintained a prominent role in the social and political lives of the population.[4]

The 1964 constitution, upon which the 2004 document is largely based, advanced the idea of direct and responsive statehood, but, in reality, the regime continued to have limited reach beyond Kabul and the major provincial centers. King Zahir Shah's constitution promised a new form of participatory politics intended to inoculate the regime from growing elite unrest and calls for a more open form of government. Unlike the attempts at institution building made today, however, this framework did not translate into substantial action

on the part of the monarchy to encourage formal institutional growth. For most Afghans in the countryside, the state continued to represent an institution of last resort in which they had limited faith and trust: only if informal institutions (tribal, religious, elders) proved unable to address a given problem, would district, provincial, or national officials become involved in the politics of daily life. The ever expansive visions of the state imposed on the Afghan population by Prime Minister Mohammed Daoud Khan and then the communist PDPA regime represented a dramatic and ultimately catastrophic departure from the more limited Musahiban model.

Parallels can be drawn between the Musahiban approach to state building and that of President Karzai: both administrations gave priority to regime preservation and formed pacts with informal power holders who dominated the periphery and had the capacity to threaten the state in serious ways. The resilience of the Musahiban kings, compared to those who came before and after them, offers an interesting lens through which to view the politics of President Karzai.

Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency: The Security Imperative

In addition to the indigenous challenges to Afghan state formation, the state-rebuilding project has been fundamentally complicated since 2001 by the original motivation behind the intervention. The United States intervened militarily in Afghanistan as a result of the September 11 attacks to weaken al-Qaeda by eliminating its safe haven in Afghanistan. The creation and support of a new government in Kabul stemmed from an American (and, subsequently, allied) imperative to ensure that Islamic extremist elements would be unable to again take root in this part of the world. In this sense, the project of rebuilding the state has been consistently subordinate to the overarching counterterrorism mission.

Elements of the counterterrorism mission have crippled the "new" state, the paradox being that the Karzai government would not have been formed if not for the "Global War on Terror." The Bush administration proposed a strategic linkage between its mission of counterterrorism and the emergence of representative, democratic governance in countries like Afghanistan. According to its 2006 *National Security Strategy*, "The advance of freedom and human dignity through democracy is the long-term solution to the transnational terrorism of today." And yet the short-term approach to counterterrorism and counterinsurgency has subverted the capacity of democratic processes to take hold in Afghanistan, thereby undermining the "long-term solution" to the problem. From the beginning, the interim administration created at Bonn reflected the domination of commanders in the Northern Alliance, whose members represented the dispossessed warlord government of the 1990s. They received ministerial portfolios and positions as a function of their military partnership

with U.S. Special Forces. The fledgling government included individuals whose legacy in Afghan history was far from democratic or representative, but whose place at the table was won through their role in the defeat of the Taliban. Warlord commanders who otherwise might not have posed a significant challenge to the state were strengthened; it has since proven difficult for the center to marginalize them, given their relationships with coalition forces as part of ongoing counterterrorism and counterinsurgency campaigns. Moreover, the absence of a robust, nationwide peace enforcement mission left the fledgling regime in Kabul without the necessary coercive support to persuade warlord commanders to disarm in a credible way.

The U.S. military agenda affected the young government's relationship not only with Northern Alliance commanders but also with the Taliban. The United States made it unequivocally clear that the Taliban represented an enemy of the state and the international community and President Karzai largely went along. Lakhdar Brahimi has since expressed regret that his efforts did not enable the creation of a political space for engagement with amenable elements of the Taliban in 2001,[5] when the Karzai government would have been in a far better negotiating position. The post-2001 government was unable to define the parameters of any bargaining process, be it with the Taliban or with Northern Alliance commanders, because it was always hemmed in by U.S. policy choices.

Ultimately, the parallel execution of counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and state-building campaigns has led to an unprecedented number of confused and complex international agendas to which the Kabul government is beholden. The international presence involves a large number of organizations and interests, many of them cross-cutting and even conflicting. Nonmilitary organizations are frustrated by the U.S. military's encroachment into their "humanitarian space" for the purpose of "winning hearts and minds." Meanwhile, the U.S. military shares the battlefield with a host of North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO) allies, as well as the UN, various aid agencies, and private contractors. Each international actor approaches the challenges at hand with different philosophies, interests, and constraints. In the midst of this incoherence, the Afghan government does not consistently take the lead in defining the state-building agenda, nor in directing its implementation. Persistent involvement in the Afghan insurgency from across the border in Pakistan has limited even further the Afghan government's control.

Hybrid Governance: A Pragmatic Perspective

In reflecting on the nature of statehood in Afghanistan today, it is important, then, to remember the larger context of the international community's intervention as well as the history of the Afghan state. President Karzai's accommodationist approach toward various warlord commanders can be understood as

a function of the limitations imposed upon him by the larger campaign against terrorism being waged, as well as by the absence of a robust international force to fill the country's security vacuum and ensure effective disarmament of these warlords. It is also critical to consider Karzai's approach as part of a longer tradition in Afghan state building and governance through accommodation of powerful competitors. In this sense, the hybrid model of governance that has emerged, a distinct combination of weak formal institutions and significant informal power, represents the latest in a tradition of stabilizing pacts between the Afghan center and its periphery.

President Karzai, to the disappointment of many, took a conciliatory approach toward several warlord commanders, pulling potential rivals into the architecture of the state by doling out valued positions in Kabul and across the provinces. While the post-2001 state may have been designed in highly centralized terms, Karzai engaged in a bargaining process with his competitors that strengthened their hold on power at the periphery. This hybrid model is a far cry from liberal, democratic statehood.

But evidence from various provinces across the country suggests that this brand of hybrid governance has produced certain dividends of value to Kabul and its international partners. Indeed, the political importance of actors whose power does not derive solely from formal institutions is far from unique to Afghanistan. Academics and policy makers alike are beginning to admit that governance in many countries involves a combination of formal and informal activity. This is true even in Western countries, where institutions have had time to consolidate; it is particularly true in post-conflict situations, where tensions are high and institutions weak.

Informal actors in the Afghan context come from a wide variety of backgrounds and interests, and have varying levels of legitimacy. Village elders, religious jurists, and tribal leaders have survived decades of turmoil and, in many cases, continue to represent legitimate institutional strongholds within Afghan society. A new set of non-state actors emerged during the Cold War in the form of *mujahideen* commanders. They derived their power from the use of violence and access to illicit income, and their presence can be detected throughout the Afghan political space today. In response to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in 1978, foreign patrons armed and supported these commanders to gain military control of large swathes of territory outside the capital. They successfully organized themselves militarily and politically in opposition to the state and its foreign backers.

But these warlords failed to translate their victory against the Soviets into a legitimate state-based regime. Instead, they dragged the country through a civil war into which the Taliban entered, eventually pushing the militias to fight for Kabul from the periphery. These long periods of prolonged violence and conflict enabled a political economy fueled by arms, drugs, and smuggling to take hold long before 2001. The U.S. military intervention in 2001, and the

subsequent Bonn process, propelled this set of informal actors back into the realm of state politics.

Opinions remain strongly divided in Afghanistan and among foreign observers as to whether the Karzai government should ever have bargained with warlords and other informal actors. Not surprisingly, several organizations and scholars took the principled position that the integration of warlords into the formal state architecture spoiled the country's opportunity to open a new chapter of governance. Their participation in the 2002 Emergency Loya Jirga and the 2005 parliamentary elections undermined the credibility of the formal political process.

On the other hand, the integration of warlords into the new state also began a transformation for several of them into more responsible political actors. According to one senior diplomat, this band of war-fighting brigands, who had lived by the gun for more than two decades, was integrated into a political process in which the gun alone would not triumph. Weak as the fledgling state was, it placed certain constraints on the commanders once they joined.

Warlord Governors: Strongmen, Statesmen, or Both?

The tenures of provincial governors Atta Mohammad Noor and Gul Agha Sherzai reflect the costs and benefits of warlord integration into new state institutions in Afghanistan. I spent the summer of 2008 in the provinces of each governor and in the capital city of Kabul conducting interviews with both men, their advisers and staffs, former subcommanders and combatants, as well as members of the private sector, media, civil society, and international agencies. While their provinces vary in dramatic ways, both warlord-governors are widely known for delivering progress in stability, reconstruction, and counternarcotics. In so doing, they have become valuable partners of the Karzai administration and its international supporters and are cited nationwide for their long tenures and exceptional performances. Their governing styles represent two viable models of hybrid governance with lessons for state building and (re) formation in Afghanistan and beyond.

Governor Atta, a Tajik commander who served under Ahmed Shah Massoud, the legendary *mujahideen* commander assassinated by al-Qaeda agents just before 9/11, is a native of the northern province of Balkh, which he has governed since 2004. Governor Sherzai, a Pashtun commander, comes from the southern province of Kandahar, where he served as governor before being transferred to the eastern province of Nangarhar in 2005. The two provinces represent two poles of the Afghan security and political situation. The northern province of Balkh is considered to be relatively stable and removed from the insurgency. In contrast, the eastern province of Nangarhar is part of the Pashtun tribal belt that borders Pakistan and lies at the heart of Afghanistan's hot zone. Because

of the threat level, Nangarhar represents a high priority for the United States and has received significant military and capital resources, while a Swedish civil-military team serves in Balkh. As is the case throughout Afghanistan, each province must be understood in its own unique terms. Nonetheless, the challenges and opportunities found in Balkh and Nangarhar reflect deeper trends throughout the country, and there are lessons to be learned from the tenures of both governors.

Atta and Sherzai were part of a clique of commanders who had the power to subvert or compete with the fledgling state in 2001. But these two individuals decided instead to join the new political project in Afghanistan. While both governors fought beside American soldiers as commanders, the nature of the informal power they leverage varies significantly and so, too, does their approach to governing. They have both been criticized for their brand of warlord politics, but each has delivered a variety of goods and services to the population, the central government, and the international community—a largely unprecedented achievement.

I have chosen these two warlords-turned-governors because they have been more successful than most in governing their provinces. Their experience, furthermore, illustrates the enormous difficulty of developing provincial governments in Afghanistan and the mixture of informal local power and political skills required in relating to the central government and the international community. But before examining the specifics of each case, both cases must be considered in the larger context of provincial governance countrywide.

The highly centralized 2004 constitution affords little autonomy to provincial governors. They operate at the critical interface between the center and the periphery, but have limited fiscal discretion and almost no formal authority to make provincial and district political and administrative appointments. Informal power matters, therefore, more than it might in a decentralized framework. To deliver progress on security, reconstruction, and counternarcotics as well as patronage to various clientele sometimes requires a capacity to leverage relationships, resources, and influence beyond the formal architecture of the state. Moreover, the absence of formal institutions at the provincial and district level gives greater value to this informal capital.

The capacity to leverage informal power and deliver to the population is insufficient, however, in this "post-conflict" game. Governors are appointed by the president, not popularly elected. The key political game, therefore, is less within the province than between the provincial governor and the central government. A number of unsuccessful strongman-governors, most notably Ismail Khan of Herat, found their rule cut short by a failure to appease the center and its foreign supporters. In a number of provinces, competent and qualified "technocrat" governors have been appointed, but they must contend with local strongmen in addition to all of the other challenges involved in provincial governance.

Governors Atta and Sherzai have found a balance between their assertion of informal power, their deference to the center, and their delivery of results to the government and the international community. It looks very different than conventional conceptions of "good governance," but it represents one enduring formula in this challenging political environment.

Atta Mohammed Noor: The Son of Balkh

Atta Mohammed Noor, the governor of Balkh province, is a warlord-turned-governor whose tenure has been characterized by a notable mix of strongman politics and efforts to enhance his administration's formal capacity. A native of Balkh, he has cultivated and consolidated a network of subcommanders and militiamen over many decades, from which he derives significant informal power and coercive capacity. He has simultaneously aligned himself with President Karzai, in contrast to other regional warlords, making himself an indispensable northern ally of the center. Having transplanted his militia clients into powerful positions throughout the provincial administration, he maintains a monopoly over violence as well as control over illicit activity. The governor's de facto control, coupled with a keen interest in enhancing the technical capacity of his administration, explains Atta's success on a number of fronts, from security and reconstruction to counternarcotics.

Provincial Governor and Strongman

Atta grew up in and remained a resident of Balkh throughout his youth and adult life, joining the *mujahideen* as a teenager. He rose in the ranks, receiving the honorific of *ustad* or "teacher," and eventually assumed command of an army corps in northern Afghanistan. Atta's militia joined U.S. forces in the fight to wrest Balkh's capital city, Mazar-i-Sharif, from the Taliban. He competed, thereafter, with the Uzbek warlord Abdur Rashid Dostum and the Hazara warlord Mohaqqeq for control of Mazar-i-Sharif. Atta carved out a role for himself as Karzai's ally in the north and was named provincial governor in 2004.

Monopoly on Violence

The governor is widely regarded as having a monopoly on violence in Balkh; his reach and influence extend across the northern territory of the country. He has established near control over the use of force within the province by installing his men throughout the provincial administration. Residents often point to this racketeering arrangement as the primary basis for Balkh's relative security and stability. Those commanders with whom the governor fought in the 1980s and 1990s have made their way into formal government positions in the provincial and district administration and police. As one provincial resident put

it, many of these individuals, if not for the patronage of the governor, might have been unemployed, prosecuted as war criminals, or involved in various destabilizing activities.

The capacity of ex-commanders and ex-combatants to destabilize the province is inhibited by their allegiance to the governor and the accountability, however limited, that derives from their new positions within the government. The governor manages their behavior through a combination of carrots and sticks that keep them in check but still at his disposal. As another citizen of the province explained, this arrangement is less than ideal:

> If we see it optimistically, we can say that this has resulted in a more secure environment. If you see it from the other side, we can say that this system of governance has resulted in a lack of rule of law, the absence of a general respect for human rights values, and sometimes insecurity as well.

The governor's strategy of embedding his loyalists throughout the administration does not advance a rights-based, rule-based, merit-based form of governance. It does, however, provide him with the capacity to survey and control goings-on throughout the province. One villager described the eyes and ears of the governor as sharp enough to immediately apprehend a small-time thief in the most remote district. As a local journalist explained, this level of penetration reflects an "unofficial, underground, paid administration … that really controls Balkh and looks after security and tries to track down those who are trying to [make] Balkh insecure."

Investment and Reconstruction

Atta's capacity to ensure security throughout the province has attracted a degree of investment and reconstruction in Mazar-i-Sharif that is exceptional in Afghanistan. One of the business leaders of the province pointed to security when asked about the governor's greatest achievement. He explained that all the other accomplishments of the governor have been made possible by a level of security unparalleled in Afghanistan. This businessman, along with a number of other traders, has contributed to a variety of public works projects normally considered the responsibility of the state. An oft-discussed example is the construction of traffic circles throughout the city. Some citizens interviewed argued that these acts of philanthropy were taken to secure the blessing and protection of the most powerful man in the province for these businessmen in their legitimate *and* illegitimate endeavors. In effect, businessmen solidify their relationships with Atta by contributing to the province's development and reconstruction.

Counternarcotics

His counternarcotics campaign is perhaps the most significant outcome of Atta's iron-fisted control, as far as the Karzai government and international

community are concerned. Balkh province achieved "poppy free" status several years ago, a development that many observers believe stems from Atta's racketeering arrangement. As one journalist explained:

> This administration is responsible for either booming narcotics or trying to get rid of opium. Otherwise, it would be very impossible for Balkh to be number three in narcotics and, then, suddenly [poppy free].

The governor and his staff attributed their success to a formal state-based approach that involved collaboration with an international consulting firm, Adam Smith International, to craft an elaborate counternarcotics strategy. According to his administration's senior technocrat, Governor Atta used "the language of government" to present a stern law enforcement message: "If you do [plant], you will be detained." Several dozens farmers were thrown in jail, and ultimately $14 million worth of opium-producing poppy was eradicated in 2005, according to the governor's office. As the years have passed, less and less has been required of the provincial government in terms of eradication and arrests, and the province has remained officially "poppy-free."

Observers outside the provincial administration explained Atta's success differently. They argued that, in Balkh, the traffickers and the police were often one and the same. In the words of one journalist:

> When you ask a robber to take care of security, he is not going to rob.… They are his own people. They are his men. They have the power in the districts and villages because of him. If they don't do it, they will get removed, they will get killed.

In either case, there is little question that the reduction in cultivation "from 7,200 hectares in 2005–2006 to zero in 2006–2007,"[6] reflects the degree of Atta's penetration and control. When applied on behalf of the state's agenda, this power yields impressive results. While the socioeconomic merits of Afghanistan's counternarcotics strategy remain up for debate, the governor's administration has been tasked with carrying out this national policy, and year after year, he has delivered.

Formal Institution Building: Limited But Real

Governor Atta undoubtedly protects and leverages informal power, particularly through ongoing links to militiamen who fought under his command. In parallel, he has embraced a number of opportunities to enhance his formal administration's technical capacity. The public administration reform process began at the provincial level as a pilot project in Balkh, an initiative described by analysts Hamish Nixon and Sarah Lister as marked by "encouraging signs of genuine reform."[7] Moreover, Atta reached out again to Adam Smith International to help him define the way ahead for provincial development. According to his staff, ASI's team leader Joseph Batac worked in conjunction

with the governor's technical service directorate to conduct a comprehensive review of the current performance and capacity of all ministerial offices at the provincial level.

Batac's assistant described a process by which each ministerial directorate identified its priorities for the next five years, after which Batac's team proposed a menu of options going forward. Ultimately, the governor himself presented the first of its kind provincial five-year plan to international donors, ANDS headquarters, and relevant central ministries. This process reflected a technical capacity *and inclination* on the part of Governor Atta's office—rare in Afghan provinces. In a UNDP-sponsored review of the pilot reform process in Balkh Province, the governor's office was singled out for the degree to which it capitalized on the reform process: "The governor's office is now able to work on coordinating with other line ministries, able to consolidate and work out provincial budgets and able to deal with the donor community wherever required."[8]

Informal power lies at the heart of Atta Mohammed Noor's governing strategy, but his approach does not exclusively rely on it; he has also demonstrated a willingness to enhance the capacity of his administration by way of formal institution building and reform. He does not feel compelled, however, to dismantle the informal networks of power that enable him to control the province and assert influence in the north and Kabul. He has secured a position as the strongest man in Balkh and protects his control over the use of violence by patronizing those who might otherwise threaten the stability of the province. The province's relative security creates space for commercial activity, reconstruction projects, and the execution of an effective counternarcotics strategy. Atta's blend of informal and formal governing involves the kinds of serious costs associated with this brand of authoritarian rule. For now, however, this may represent a compromise worth understanding and supporting, though tentatively and with a pragmatic recognition of the risks involved.

Gul Agha Sherzai: The "Bulldozer" of Nangarhar

Governor Gul Agha Sherzai faces a very different geopolitical landscape from that of Governor Atta and governs in a style distinct from his northern colleague; his rule, however, is similarly marked by a strong reliance on informal politics and power. Gul Agha Sherzai arrived in Nangarhar in 2005, familiar to locals as a Pashtun politician, but lacking an informal network of the kind Atta had in Balkh. In the Pashtun border province of Nangarhar, informal institutions tend to reside within a complex web of tribal politics, the likes of which does not exist in a northern province like Balkh. Unlike Balkh, the stability of Nangarhar province is of particular value to the central government and coalition forces. Nangarhar is a physical and symbolic bulwark against extremist incursions into Afghanistan. The capital city of Jalalabad is also the

commercial gateway between Afghanistan and Pakistan and a crucial link along the U.S. military supply chain. The United States has invested a great deal in Nangarhar, and its relative prosperity can be attributed, in large part, to a degree of American attention that few other parts of the country receive. Nangarhar's strategic location presents its governor with a particular set of challenges and opportunities.

Governor Sherzai adopted a newcomer's strategy of co-opting the tribal leadership at the district and village level through regular consultations and the provision of gifts and favors. He has leveraged these relationships, as well as ties to the U.S. military ground forces, to affirm his authority. In so doing, Sherzai has successfully delivered on a variety of priorities, from counternarcotics and reconstruction to provincial security, without necessarily advancing the cultivation of formal institutions of provincial governance.

Provincial Governor and Tribal Khan

Counternarcotics

The utility of the governor's links to the four major tribes of Nangarhar can be observed in his counternarcotics campaign. The 2007–2008 poppy season in Afghanistan witnessed a near-total cessation of cultivation in Nangarhar province, a dramatic shift from the previous season. Field research by David Mansfield, a leading expert on the drug economy in Afghanistan, indicated that "whilst three-quarters of those interviewed reported that they had cultivated opium poppy in the 2006/2007 growing season, none produced opium in the 2007/2008 growing season."[9]

A counternarcotics advisory team provided the governor with technical support, but the team leader, in an interview with the author, repeatedly attributed the province's success to Sherzai's relationships with tribal elders. According to him, Sherzai met with elders routinely, treating them to feasts during Ramadan, providing them with gifts, and advertising development and reconstruction efforts widely. Tribal committees received discretionary funds, foodstuffs, and construction assistance for schools and mosques. In exchange, elders publicly pledged to assist the governor's administration in ensuring that farmers would not cultivate poppy. When asked to explain the success of Nangarhar's counternarcotics strategy, the governor himself pointed the author in the direction of the "jirgas [councils] or shuras [consultations] amongst the people," in which each of the tribes made a decision to curtail poppy cultivation.

Compliance to this degree, particularly in districts that historically remained beyond the reach of government authorities, was very rare in Nangarhar, according to Mansfield. His research findings characterized the governor's efforts as a "particularly effective campaign." He attributed success in Nangarhar to a combination, or hybrid, of pointed, punitive legal action with co-optive tribal engagement:

> The arrest and incarceration of a number of farmers in some of the more remote districts were critical to deterring cultivation across the province—as was the compliance of a number of key elders from these districts.[10]

Sherzai's personal engagement with tribal leaders on counternarcotics created sufficient sociopolitical capital to enforce policies that might otherwise have been ignored. Mansfield's research indicated that elders and village shuras in Nangarhar served as conduits through which the government relayed its intentions to the population. In contrast, he learned that farmers in southern provinces like Helmand and Kandahar did not learn of the poppy ban from village or tribal leaders, a reflection of the disconnect between the provincial administrations and their citizens: southern Afghan farmers did not believe their government had the inclination or the wherewithal to follow through on its counternarcotics policy. Potential cultivators in Nangarhar, on the other hand, reported to Mansfield that they felt Sherzai's administration had both the motivation and the capability to implement its counternarcotics strategy effectively. Tribal cooperation signaled the provincial government's credibility on this issue to the local population and facilitated the campaign's success. Tribal elders translated the agenda of the governor, and of Kabul, into popular compliance and, in so doing, lent their informal political capital to the formal administration of the state.

Stability Amid Coalition Military Activity

In addition to the governor's success in counternarcotics, many point to the larger stabilizing effects of his outreach to tribal elders in the province. One local university professor referenced the governor's consultative attitude in explaining the stability of the province in the face of great change:

> In a democracy, people's ideas should be collected and this is what the governor is doing. If he had started to implement all projects without considering the priorities of the people, it would have distressed people. It would not have received a positive response. He is not a dictator—he has collected people's ideas and involved people in the decision-making process.

The governor's outreach to the Nangarhari population via the tribes, in other words, represents a valuable, gradualist approach to governing.

There are several critics of the governor's tribal strategy, who argue that this gradualist approach is far from participatory or representative, politically speaking. One journalist argued that the tribal elders with whom Governor Sherzai has become close do not necessarily speak for their communities; in fact, he described the coterie of tribal members who consistently engage with the governor as "rentable elders." Another journalist explained that the governor initially sought out honorable and respected elders in each district. But the nature of their interactions with the governor has created distance between

them and the people they claim to represent. He and others described a series of invitations to the palace, festive meals, and gifts of turbans, all of which please provincial elders but do not involve substantive discussion of matters critical to ordinary Nangarharis.

Critics of the governor's client-centered style concede, however, that he is able to mobilize this network of support in situations where the province's security and stability would otherwise be in jeopardy. Ongoing U.S. military activity, in particular, exposes the government to real political vulnerability. One prominent tribal elder from the province described Governor Sherzai's outreach to the tribes as critical in an environment where local trust in government is routinely compromised by the errors of coalition forces. He cited a particularly difficult episode, the bombing of a wedding party outside of Jalalabad in the summer of 2008. The governor immediately traveled to the scene and brought President Karzai to meet those affected. Even a critic of the governor's politics, a local nongovernmental organization (NGO) employee, explained that Sherzai's established relationship with local tribal leaders ensured their calm in this explosive situation. A few weeks later, U.S. troops detained several religious scholars, prompting Sherzai to push Karzai to step in on their behalf. The governor reportedly threatened to resign if they were not released; when they were, the detainees were driven home in Sherzai's own vehicles, according to the aforementioned elder.

An Additional Source of Leverage: American Sticks and Carrots

Governor Sherzai's legitimacy, and that of the central government, is sometimes made tenuous by the presence of coalition forces, but the governor also relies on his relationship with the American military to advance his agenda. He leverages this relationship to boost his own popularity and power in ways that may undermine state building but advance the agenda of the Kabul government nonetheless. Mansfield's research suggested that, in the realm of counternarcotics, a common belief emerged among the population that coalition forces were involved in counternarcotics efforts in Nangarhar. The governor capitalized on this belief to coerce farmers into ceasing cultivation. Some residents living in the remote district of Achin, according to Mansfield, claimed that Governor Sherzai posed the following threat: "You should not grow poppy. I don't have the power to protect you and your land from U.S. forces."[11] The governor thus rhetorically relinquished his most fundamental role on behalf of the state (to protect his population), telling citizens that their security would fall beyond his control if they grew poppy.

Sherzai takes advantage of the U.S. military's focus on his province not only for its coercive value, but also for the rich dividends it yields. He routinely underscores, in particular, his close relations with the American provincial reconstruction team (PRT) in Jalalabad, which is responsible for a tremendous

amount of reconstruction and development throughout the province. The team's investment in the province, according to one U.S. government official, has yielded millions of dollars worth of construction, including roads, schools, canals, a slaughterhouse, and a dormitory for the disabled. According to this official, the governor is known to speak often of his relationship with "'Mr. America'" and the benefits that relationship has produced for those who live in Nangarhar. While the PRT articulates its role as bolstering the office of the provincial governor and the formal administration that surrounds it, Sherzai frames the dynamic in more personal terms that underscore his value as the provincial leader.

Formal Institution Building: Beside the Point

The governor has effectively incorporated American efforts into his own tribal politics of patronage. Like a tribal *khan*, Sherzai spends much of his time holding court in his personal palace. As one journalist explained, if a project proposal or request is presented to him in this setting, the governor provides the funds immediately or promises to take it up with the PRT. This journalist further described the manner in which ordinary citizens also seek audience with Sherzai and sometimes receive immediate gratification for their efforts: When he heard from a number of university lecturers about their colleague's heart ailment, the governor promptly ordered the disbursement of several thousands of dollars. On an evening stroll through the city, he apparently came upon an older man selling food on the street; Sherzai handed the vendor several hundred dollars after listening to his story. The governor is also well known for his taste in the performing arts and entertains at his palace on a regular basis. In all of these ways, Gul Agha Sherzai's approach is much more that of a traditional leader than a modern, disciplined technocrat.

For the governor, the imperative to secure the blessing of key tribal leaders often takes precedence over other objective criteria in policy making. One of Sherzai's closest advisors, Haji Malik Nazir, is a prominent elder from the Khugiani tribe. In an interview with the author, he explained how the endorsement of the tribes can trump qualifications like education and expertise in determining the appointment of officials at the district and village level:

> The governor prefers to appoint someone who has the support of the people… sometimes, it has been seen that district governors are not educated but they have the support of the tribes—they eliminate poppy cultivation and they are able to maintain political stability. So, irrespective of being qualified or educated, they are being appointed.

Haji Malik Nazir is himself a beneficiary of a hiring process that values tribal clout over technocratic capacity. Through public administration reform efforts, a new individual was appointed by Kabul to replace Nazir as the province's

administrative and financial director. But another official in the governor's office told the author that Governor Sherzai chose to disregard Kabul and keep Nazir in the position.

The province is not devoid of formal capacity but, unlike Governor Atta, Sherzai is not known for fostering institution building proactively. The provincial director of the education ministry, for example, received his appointment through the public administration reform process and holds a master's degree from a Pakistani university. He has developed various strategies to negotiate his way through and *around* the sketchy architecture of the formal provincial administration. Despite the shortcomings of the formal bureaucracy, this director claimed to have accomplished a great deal (500,000 students registered, 154 schools built, 8,000 teachers trained, 3,000 teachers recruited). He told the author that he works with the governor's office, but also directly with NGOs, the provincial reconstruction team, and donor agencies. According to this particular bureaucrat, because Sherzai is not a partisan embroiled in Nangarhari tribal politics, he does not interfere inappropriately in the allocation of resources related to education.

Still, qualified bureaucrats like this ministerial representative operate without the kind of institutional support or leadership one would expect as a result of public administration reform. Those involved in guiding the development process within Nangarhar province more generally express frustration with the governor's disinterest in their efforts. As one government official lamented:

> He wants to make some parks for Kabul people to come and see and say "Very nice." But this is not important.… In the beginning the governor was involved in all of this because the ANDS people, when they came, contacted the governor. But, every day and every time, that is what is important.… The development process is a continuous process—half of the time, he should be with development and half with security.

Governor Sherzai seems to face little imperative to advance beyond a politics of informal relations so long as he can deliver on the agendas of Kabul and the United States, while keeping prominent tribal leaders satisfied. A reduction in poppy cultivation, coupled with relative stability and significant reconstruction, represent valuable achievements in the Pashtun belt of Afghanistan. These results can be achieved through short-term strategies that do not require significant provincial government capacity building. While the PRT aims to develop the capacity of the state at the provincial level, the governor incorporates the U.S. economic, military, and political commitment to Nangarhar into his personalized scheme of tribal patronage. Sherzai governs, therefore, in largely informal terms that do not promote state building but nonetheless fulfill various priorities of the central government and its international partners in a particularly volatile part of the country.

Conclusion

Counterterrorism and state building coexist in Afghanistan as they never did in the world before September 11, 2001. In this sense, the Afghan project represents the vanguard of future interventions where extremism is taken on in historically weak states. The convergence of these two agendas in Afghanistan has led to the reinvigoration of armed non-state actors who initially enabled a military path to root out the Taliban but then came to represent obstacles to strong, centralized statehood. Evidence from the last several years, however, suggests that a few "warlords" have leveraged their informal power to contribute to a governing system that, while imperfect, may represent what international development agencies have come to call "good enough governance." A longer view acknowledges that the history of Afghan statehood may have involved formal centralization, even brief periods of strength, but the reach of comprehensive and effective formal institutions to the periphery has no precedent. Expecting such an outcome in a short time frame, in the face of limited resources and competing agendas within a very tough neighborhood, has always been unrealistic.

Instead, warlord governors like Atta Mohammed Noor and Gul Agha Sherzai employ informal power, rules, and networks to preserve control over their respective provinces. Informalized politics of this kind does not yield a technocratic, rule-based approach to governance. In fact, it inflicts a number of costs on the population and the state, from inefficiency to corruption and human rights abuse. Warlord governors like Atta Mohammed Noor and Gul Agha Sherzai as well as warlord parliamentarians, police chiefs, and party leaders across the country represent the cost of conducting state building as part of a larger strategy to tackle terrorism and insurgency. Democracy may be the ultimate elixir to extremism, but current instruments of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency are unlikely to enable democratic governance. In Afghanistan and elsewhere, international efforts often enable de facto hybrid governance despite promoting a de jure model of statehood based on strong formal institutional growth. Claims to the contrary create unrealistic expectations and subsequent disappointment and disillusionment on the part of ordinary Afghans and Western citizens alike, as perfection becomes the enemy of "good enough."

The absence of democratic governance does not, however, mean the absence of governance altogether. On the contrary, warlord governors like Atta and Sherzai have delivered significant governing dividends at the provincial level. A "good enough" governor, who can demonstrate success in counternarcotics, security, and economic and infrastructural development, becomes a valuable asset in the absence of unlimited resources, troops, and political will. Acknowledgment of hybrid governance need not mean the abandonment

of formal institutional capacity building on the part of international, intervening organizations. Rather, they must adopt more realistic expectations of formal institutions.

They must acknowledge when informal institutions have a productive, if imperfect, role to play in Afghanistan and other post-conflict environments and put forward metrics of institutional design and assessment that consider the nuances and constraints of history, power, and resources in more pragmatic terms. The United States and its partners remain a critical part of the bargaining process between the Afghan center and periphery and must use their influence to help check the power of warlords, where necessary, and cultivate formal institutional capacity where possible. Meritocracy, transparency, and true adherence to the rule of law emerge, if at all, on their own terms and never entirely disentangled from the personalized and patronage politics of the informal realm.

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that throughout history, weak states have struck deals with competing power holders, offering political positions, property, and prestige in exchange for loyalty and support, however tentative. In Afghanistan, this pattern of bargaining and compromise, reinforced by parallel counterterrorism and counterinsurgency campaigns, can be framed as a kind of racketeering arrangement: warlord governors and their subordinates pose a danger to the state but, when approached with certain carrots and sticks, they shield the state from the very threat they create.[12] When inclined, they even have the capacity to deliver goods and services for their citizens and the international community as a result of their combined formal and informal power. Over time, these actors and the rules and organizations they represent can be influenced by the slow but palpable emergence of formal institutions around them. The state does not grow strong as a result of their inclusion, but this period of hybrid governance may represent an inevitable stage in the project of state (re)formation in Afghanistan.

Notes

1 "A golden principle for international assistance should be that everyone shall do everything possible to work himself or herself out of a job as early as possible. This is, in very simple terms, the principle of a 'light footprint' advocated in the so-called 'Brahimi Report'…. Invariably, we helplessly witness overly-large international missions duplicating local skills without the benefit of local knowledge, which leads to parallel aid delivery mechanisms that actually undermine national institutional development." Lakhdar Brahimi, "State Building in Crisis and Post-Conflict Countries" 7th Global Forum on Reinventing Government, Building Trust in Government, June 26–29, 2007, Vienna, Austria: 16.

2 See the description of the "liberal peace" model in Astri Suhrke, "Reconstruction as Modernisation: the 'Post-conflict' Project in Afghanistan" *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 7, 2007: 1292.

3 Thomas J. Barfield, "Weak Links on a Rusty Chain: Structural Weaknesses in Afghanistan's Provincial Government" in *Revolutions and Rebellions in Afghanistan*, M. Nazif Shahrani and Robert L. Canfield, eds. (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1984): 175.

4 David J. Katz, "Responses to Central Authority in Nuristan: The Case of the Vaygal Valley Kalasha" in *Revolutions and Rebellions in Afghanistan*, M. Nazif Shahrani and Robert L. Canfield, eds. (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1984): 105.

5 Lakhdar Brahimi, "A New Path for Afghanistan" *Washington Post*, December 7, 2008: B07.

6 Adam Pain, "'Let Them Eat Promises': Closing the Opium Poppy Fields in Balkh and its Consequences" (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, December 2008): iii.

7 Sarah Lister and Hamish Nixon, "Provincial Governance Structures in Afghanistan: From Confusion to Vision?" (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, May 2006): 11.

8 P. Madhava Rao, "Public Administration Reform in Balkh Province: A Rapid Review" prepared for United Nations Development Project Afghanistan, September 19, 2007.

9 David Mansfield, "Responding to Risk and Uncertainty: Understanding the Nature of Change in the Rural Livelihoods of Opium Poppy Growing Households in the 2007/08 Growing Season" prepared for the Afghan Drugs Inter Departmental Unit of the UK Government, July 2008, available at http://www.davidmansfield.org, 8.

10 Mansfield, 22.

11 Mansfield, 27.

12 For a description of warlordism as racketeering in the Afghan private sector, see Antonio Giustozzi, "War and Peace Economies of Afghanistan's Strongmen" *International Peacekeeping*, vol. 14, no. 1 and "Afghanistan: Transition Without End: An Analytical Narrative on State-Making" Working Paper no. 40, Crisis States Research Centre, November 2008: 41–43.

Throughout the text, several interviews conducted by the author are referenced. Most of the interviews were not recorded in order to protect the subjects given the sensitivity of the material discussed. Most interviews were conducted with Dari-speaking and Pashto-speaking subjects and involved the use of an interpreter. For both of these reasons, the quotations included may be imperfect, though every effort was made to maintain the integrity of the words expressed by each subject.

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