

Democratic Aspirations and Destabilizing Outcomes in Afghanistan

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Abstract

The United States and its allies, in control of Afghanistan since October 2001, failed to support the development of an inclusive, legitimate and accountable political system. This paper examines how the imposition of an inappropriate model of democracy, the prioritization of American interests over those of Afghans, and a pattern of expedient political decisions have contributed to the destabilization of the country. The democracy and state-building model imposed on Afghanistan was stymied from the outset by critical foundational flaws. These include the return to power of discredited warlords reviled by most Afghans, the marginalization of particular groups including the remnants of the Taliban movement, and the concentration of power in an executive Presidency at the expense of a weak parliamentary structure. In 2014, along with the drawdown of US and NATO troops, Afghanistan's disputed election saga ended in a no-victor deal that effectively discarded the (as yet unknown) results of the ballot box. Once again, Washington politics reinforced the grip of a warlord-dominated elite on the machinery of the state and exposed the hollowness of the US-led and UN-supported state building project.

I Introduction

The Afghanistan of 2014 is not the same country that came under the control of the United States and its allies at the end of 2001. It has undergone many changes – profound and superficial, positive and negative – since the US invasion and the demise of the Taliban regime. Among those changes is the introduction of a new political system. This paper examines how the imposition of an inappropriate model of democracy on Afghanistan, the prioritization of American interests over those of Afghans, and a pattern of expedient political decisions have contributed to the destabilization of the country.

2014 is routinely described as “pivotal” given the many significant events that are scheduled to occur this year. These include a drawdown of US and NATO troops and a standoff over a US-Afghan Bilateral Security Agreement that was, finally, signed on September 30. As donor funds diminish and investment capital declines, a major contraction of the economy is predicted to add to the country's woes. The Afghan presidential elections have been touted as a pivotal 2014 event and an indicator of Afghanistan's democratic maturity. The nerve-wracking election saga over the last year, however, required numerous interventions by President Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry to broker an agreement on a successor to President Karzai. Mr. Karzai's time in office largely mirrored that of

the arrival and departure of the bulk of US military personnel in Afghanistan. As America's longest war comes to an end, Afghans will continue to suffer the costs of conflict on and off the battlefield.

Those in control of Afghanistan since October 2001 have failed to develop an inclusive, legitimate and accountable political system. The democracy and state-building model imposed on Afghanistan was stymied from the outset by critical foundational flaws. These included the resuscitation and return to power of discredited warlords who were greatly reviled by most Afghans and had been defeated or routed from Afghanistan by the Taliban in the mid-1990s. The architects of post-Taliban regime Afghanistan exhibited a high level of tolerance for impunity. This meant that there was no meaningful investment in securing accountability for war crimes, pervasive corruption, torture and other human rights violations associated with warlord rule. The democracy project marginalized or excluded particular groups including the remnants of the Taliban movement. These flaws were compounded by the concentration of power in an executive Presidency that increased the leverage of the President at the expense of a weak parliamentary structure and a dysfunctional electoral system that ignored the reality of a multi-ethnic society. Initial flaws and subsequent failures were a significant factor in the resumption of war.

A dominant feature of Afghanistan's contemporary political culture is the central role of a predatory, corrupt, warlord-style elite that maintains an abusive stranglehold on power through direct and indirect control of state machinery and resources. Various warlord-era and other such groups that made up, or operated in sync with, the Karzai Administration also benefited from, and helped sustain, a flourishing war economy. 2013 was the most violent year in Afghanistan since 2001. A resilient and renascent insurgency has proven resourceful in withstanding superior military might while expanding its influence across the country. The armed opposition has benefited from dysfunctional governance as well as from a multi-billion annual opium trade.

While most US military and other NATO personnel head home in the months ahead, older adults in Afghanistan will be heading into their 36th year of armed conflict. The human costs of war in Afghanistan – death, destruction, detention, displacement, disappearances and dispossession – have yet to be fully enumerated. But few families have been left unscathed by decades of war. Recent research indicates that three in four Afghans have been involuntarily displaced at some point in their life.²

The long years of war in Afghanistan are as much a product of external power politics and related geo-strategic maneuvering as they are a reflection of unresolved questions on different models of national governance and divisions in Afghan society. On the one hand, the Taliban favor a theocratic, fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. On the other hand, the governance model imposed after 9/11 favored a liberal peace agenda built on a market economy and Western notions of democracy.

As a result, at the end of 2014, Afghans are facing the problems inherent in a legacy of fraud-scarred elections that have strained relations between various ethnic groups. The new “government of national unity” will have to deal with a state characterized by poorly functioning institutions and rising levels of warfare and insecurity exacerbated by widespread lawlessness. It will also be confronted with devastating levels of poverty and deprivation coupled with a great deal of anxiety about the future. In many respects, Afghans are now faced with more troubled and limited prospects for shaping their future in a collective fashion than they had at the end of 2001.

Whatever the immediate or medium-term outcomes of the various, ongoing transitions – military, financial, political – 2014 is an important year in Afghanistan’s decades long crisis. Washington will likely distance itself from the country’s inherited problems associated with the US-defined and imposed democratization and governance model.

The Bonn Agreement, signed by a select group of Afghan strongmen and US allies in December 2001, established the blueprint for a post-Taliban Afghanistan. Geared to a process of peace consolidation, democratization and related state building, it achieved some progress. More Afghans than ever before have access to education and health care and numerous civil society organizations are championing human rights and gender equity.

However, the Bonn process and related architecture have given rise to numerous governance failures, frustration, and fear. The concentration and abuse of power, which has marginalized and disempowered large segments of society, is particularly concerning. A rising number of young people (and three quarters of the country’s population is under 25) across Afghanistan have different aspirations than those of the warlords who dominated during the factional fighting of the early 1990s. They want a government that is honest, accountable and focused on the security and well being of all Afghan citizens. While these aspirations have been thwarted, many of the changes of the last decade plus that are routinely depicted as positive have not become deeply embedded in Afghan society and have been widely called unsustainable.³ Gender equality legislation, security sector reform measures, and anti-corruption initiatives are likely to face numerous challenges. The threats posed by ruthless political entrepreneurs – those who hold power as a result of warlord era and contemporary predatory practices - may derail the fragile democratic gains achieved to date. Moreover, regional dynamics, particularly involving Pakistan and Iran, will continue to buffet Afghanistan.

II Expedient Politics and Unholy Alliances

The precarious democracy that Afghans will inherit as a result of the US-led intervention is rooted in the politics that gave shape to the Bonn Agreement. The destabilizing nature of Afghanistan’s democracy can also be attributed to the way in which the Bonn process was subordinated to the goals of the Global War on Terror.

The Bonn Agreement was cobbled together in a matter of days under the guidance of United Nations (UN) Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi and US Ambassador James Dobbins who “led a diverse group of international diplomats and warriors to consensus” on a framework that would shape the future of post Taliban regime Afghanistan.⁴ The twenty-five Afghans who participated and signed the Bonn Agreement were not representative of their country’s diversity and many of them had spent long years in exile or were known primarily for their *mujahideen* backgrounds or membership in the anti-Taliban, Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance. Washington arranged for Hamid Karzai, who was promoted as a “viable candidate” to head an interim administration, to address the opening session of the Bonn Conference via satellite phone from Afghanistan. Karzai was subsequently selected as President of the interim government that launched the Bonn process.

The Bonn process included the organization of Judicial and Constitutional Commissions in the lead-up to Presidential and Parliamentary elections in 2004 and 2005 respectively. This process suffered from the limited engagement of civil society actors and the exclusion of those associated with the Taliban regime. It resulted in a winner-takes-all electoral system that was antagonistic to inclusive and representative governance. It laid the seeds for the resurrection of the Taliban a few years later.

The democratization and state-building program was a combined multilateral and Afghan affair. From the start, however, it was shaped – strategically, militarily, politically, and financially – by Washington, beginning with the launch of Operation Enduring Freedom in October 2001. The stated rationale for US intervention included the liberation of Afghans, especially women, from the repression that was a hallmark of the Taliban regime. The overriding preoccupation of the Bush and Obama Administrations, however, was the execution of the Global War on Terror, whatever the costs to Afghans and stability in the region. The prioritization of US over Afghan interests has had significant negative repercussions that will continue to exact a heavy price long after Washington and its allies declare “mission accomplished” in Afghanistan.

Commenting on America’s 2001 intervention, retired General Stanley McChrystal noted that Washington went into Afghanistan “in a reflexive way after 9/11” to get rid of Al Qaeda and found an already “deeply damaged nation” which became a *de facto* US responsibility.⁵ The US also had no clear strategy in 2001 to deal with Afghanistan once it routed the Taliban, whose members promptly escaped to sanctuaries in Pakistan. The political culture and history of Afghanistan were largely ignored as Washington effectively treated the country as a blank slate.

It is rarely if ever acknowledged, for example, that Afghans, including the Taliban, did not invite Osama Bin Laden to their country. Bin Laden returned to Afghanistan at the beginning of 1996, having first arrived in the 1980s to support the anti-Soviet *Jihad* that Saudi Arabia and the US backed financially and politically. When the Taliban marched into Kabul in September 1996 they effectively inherited Bin Laden.

US policy also suffered from a poor reading of the dynamics that resulted in the Taliban's rise to power. A long history of traditional forms of local governance, forms that predated the rise of the anti-Soviet *mujahideen* and the emergence of political Islam, was effectively ignored. Afghans have a deeply rooted norm that governance must be Muslim and fair in order to be acceptable and legitimate.

The centralization of the state's authority in an Executive Presidency with few checks and balances was, inevitably, disastrous. Karzai was Washington's preferred candidate and duly became Afghanistan's first democratically elected President in 2004. While he had little real power initially, he was adept at bargaining with different sets of strongmen, who had clout as a result of their prior or updated predatory practices and patronage networks. As a result, there was little space for the emergence of a system of democratic representation based on popular support.

No less an authority than Zalmay Khalilzad, who was Bush's special presidential envoy and US Ambassador to Afghanistan from 2002-2005, noted that democratic progress is difficult when power rests "in the hands of those who gain control over people and resources through the command of armed groups".⁶ He added that Afghanistan in 2002 lacked basic state institutions and that Afghans were unhappy to find themselves back under the control of warlords associated with atrocities that had contributed to the rise of the Taliban. Nonetheless, while the US recognized that "quasi-feudal power centers were not conducive to the goal of democratization," Washington "was unwilling to expend the effort necessary to challenge and remove" these powerful henchmen.⁷ This contrasted sharply with the post-9/11 Bush administration narrative that presented democracy and human rights promotion as critical elements of the Global War on Terror package.⁸

The promotion of democracy might have acquired a greater degree of Afghan ownership if the promise of peace and prosperity had been realized. In 2012, Afghanistan was categorized as authoritarian and ranked at 152 out of 167 countries reviewed in the Democracy Index.⁹ A USAID-funded survey conducted in 2012 showed that security remained the priority concern of Afghans with economic issues a close second.¹⁰

Afghans were and are interested in a democratic system geared to representative and accountable governance and characterized by the transparent and peaceful sharing and transfer of power.¹¹ A recent survey found that Afghans have divergent views on the functioning of democracy in their country, with 39 percent fairly satisfied and 33 percent not satisfied with their democratic experience.¹² Afghans who are unimpressed with the post-Taliban regime version of democracy point to its many failures to deliver justice and essential services and associate the term itself "with the unwanted imposition of Western values" and as contrary to Islamic values.¹³

By 2012, the Obama White House, in contrast to its upbeat public narrative, had effectively concluded that Afghans had valid concerns about the nature and

future of democracy in their country. Prior to the NATO Summit meeting in Chicago, US officials acknowledged that the criteria for success had been redefined and metrics lowered so that the phrase “Afghan good enough” was used routinely by White House staffers.¹⁴ Contrary to public rhetoric, the White House had reportedly concluded as early as 2010 that the US strategy was unlikely to lead to a well-functioning democratic state and began to review policy within this limited or even pejorative framework.¹⁵

The notion that Afghans were neither interested in, nor capable of developing a vibrant and healthy democracy lacks evidence. Such perceptions and related narratives can only be understood as self-serving camouflage for the many miscalculations and strategic mistakes made by the Bush and Obama Administrations. Both Administrations failed to cohere around a democratization agenda that was rooted in the aspirations of the majority of Afghans who wanted an end to decades of political turmoil associated with foreign interference.

III Discredited State Institutions and Dysfunctional Governance

The democracy-as-sideshow approach embraced by the US as it pursued its Global War on Terror agenda had echoes in the different initiatives that materialized to support state building in Afghanistan. Just as the democratization process had inherent contradictions including the empowerment of warlords, unchallenged impunity, and the exclusion of those opposed to the neoliberal Global War On Terror agenda, so too did the state building project. The absence of meaningful checks and balances and, by extension, an effective separation of powers meant that few civil servants in key positions were non-partisan. This facilitated the concentration of power in the Presidential Palace and the sidelining of Parliament. Karzai was able to co-opt or marginalize various parliamentarians and used Presidential decrees to sidestep the legislature on several occasions.

The division-of-spoils approach that was a hallmark of the Karzai era handicapped both the development and effectiveness of state institutions and the realization of a credible governance apparatus. The post 9/11, Phoenix-like resurrection of former *mujahideen* commanders saw individuals whose armed groups were reportedly responsible for massive human rights violations, including rape, torture, and extra-judicial killings, catapulted into Ministerial posts and other positions of authority. The control and capture of state assets, natural resources, and governance mechanisms by a powerful and increasingly authoritarian elite contributed to record-breaking levels of corruption.¹⁶

In 2012 and 2013, Afghanistan, together with Somalia and North Korea, shared the worst ranking at 175 in a review of corruption in 177 countries.¹⁷ In Afghanistan, predatory governance, corruption, human rights violations, and impunity are mutually reinforcing drivers of a criminalized economy, lawlessness and insecurity. This toxic mix largely accounts for the poverty that blights the lives of more than a third of the Afghan population. The country is ranked 96 out of 105 member states on the UN’s 2011 multidimensional poverty

index that measures deprivation using a cluster of health, education and standard of living indicators.¹⁸ Access to health care has improved in Afghanistan but more than a decade after the fall of the Taliban government, a stunning “55% of the country’s children are stunted because of inadequate food,” according to Afghan and UN data in early 2014.¹⁹

Corrupt governance is rapacious and resented but persists in Afghanistan for several reasons. The lack of accountability is an important factor, as is the nature of the war economy. Western engagement in armed hostilities involves the use of private security companies and local militias, which often are of direct financial benefit to unscrupulous power-holders and insurgents.²⁰ Afghan government officials have noted that Washington routinely hands out dollars directly “to graft plagued contractors and subcontractors”.²¹ US officials defend themselves by deflecting attention onto Afghan officials. Karl Eikenberry, who served in Afghanistan as Commander of US Forces and as Ambassador, claimed that traditional Afghan powerbrokers and Karzai allies have consistently opposed “foreign efforts to create transparent, rule-bound” institutions because this would risk undermining “their political domination and economic banditry”.²²

The armed opposition was able to exploit widespread disillusionment with the government’s poor performance as it expanded its presence beyond the Pashtun belt. A revamped counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy that was rolled out with the 2009 International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) troop surge, was, in theory, focused on protecting civilians and building local infrastructure as part of a “hearts and minds” campaign. However, the COIN strategy was soon fixated on defeating the Taliban “while giving short shrift to Afghan politics”.²³ The policy of intensified warfare in combination with a new generation of local strongmen added to the problems of war-weary Afghans. Last year, civilian deaths totaled nearly 3,000 and include the highest recorded number of women and children casualties since the collection of gender disaggregated data began in 2009.²⁴ Some 630,000 Afghans have been internally displaced by warfare in recent years, while more than 2.5 million who fled the country earlier remain abroad as refugees.²⁵

President Karzai was unenthusiastic about the COIN strategy. He argued that it ignored Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan and resulted in parallel institutions of government within Afghanistan.²⁶ At the 2011 Munich Security Conference, Karzai made it clear that by parallel structures he meant private security firms, Provincial Reconstruction Teams and “direct money and support to provincial officers,” contractual mechanisms and the “spending of resources through channels other than the Afghan government”.²⁷ Aid organizations estimated that by 2009, just as the COIN military surge began, 65 percent of all aid was provided by international military forces.²⁸ Few could disagree with Karzai’s argument that substitution systems “undermine the capacity of the state rather than building it”.²⁹

The parallel, externally funded structures that Karzai names above, such as private security firms, for example, were just as lawless and harmful as

predatory state institutions. These structures also weakened Afghanistan's war-ravaged state apparatus. Parallel systems also resulted from incoherent and expedient policies, and they strengthened patronage networks, enfeebled the civil service, and fuelled corruption and the informal economy.³⁰ Washington provided some US\$52 billion in aid between 2002 and 2010; more than half was allocated to the training of Afghan security forces and the bulk of the remainder went to "off-budget" allocations including foreign contractors and non-governmental organizations.³¹

The US preoccupation with defeating the Taliban militarily, in lieu of investing in accountable and sustainable governance capabilities, raises questions about the sustainability of Afghan institutions, including the security forces. The Afghan National Army (ANA) was largely designed, trained and funded by the US with help from NATO allies. An independent study found that monthly dropout rates since 2004 "have generally fluctuated between 2–3 percent" which means that "at least one quarter to one third of the army has been lost due to attrition."³² The total number of Afghan soldiers and police killed in thirteen years of war is 13,729, according to Karzai's office.³³

A Pentagon sponsored study undertaken by the Center for Naval Analysis (CNA) concluded that Afghanistan would likely require considerably more troops and dollars than envisioned by NATO at the 2012 Chicago Summit. The CNA study found that the "Taliban insurgency is likely to swell" as NATO winds down its presence in Afghanistan and pointed to the issues involved in financing a force that "will likely cost between \$5 - \$6 billion annually."³⁴ With donors funding some 90 percent of Afghan public expenditure and virtually 100 percent of the ANA's budget, the new Afghan government will be hard-pressed to find the resources necessary to maintain security forces at reduced, never mind current, levels.³⁵

The new government will also be confronted with a criminalized rule of law situation that ranks 98 out of 99 countries included in the 2014 Rule of Law Index.³⁶ The poor ranking was attributed, in part, to the low level of independence exercised by the judiciary, deemed the most corrupt state institution in Afghanistan.³⁷ The judiciary is often used as a tool to safeguard the interests of influential strongmen. The average Afghan citizen has limited access to impartial court processes and most have little confidence in the formal justice system.³⁸ Sima Samar, the Chair of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, reported that corruption in the judiciary has been particularly harmful for women: in a six month period last year, only 400 out of 2,400 cases of violence against women that were referred to the justice system were processed and adjudicated.³⁹

The problems faced by women and other citizens who seek redress in the courts are compounded by the practices of a brutal and corrupt policing and intelligence system that often operates outside the law. UN studies found that more than half of conflict-related detainees were subjected to abusive interrogation and other techniques that are barred under Afghan and international law.⁴⁰ Examples of police brutality include a well-documented

history of human rights violations during the tenure of General Abdul Raziq, the provincial police chief in Kandahar since mid-2011. Before this, Raziq was a militia leader and local warlord in charge of the border police in Spin Boldak, close to the Pakistani frontier. Here, he acquired fame and fortune, as he benefitted from the lucrative opium trade in the provinces of Kandahar and Helmand, which produce some 90 percent of the annual global supply.⁴¹

Raziq, a Karzai ally, has long maintained a close relationship with US Special Forces. He faces allegations of extra-judicial killings, private prisons, torture and drug trafficking.⁴² The UN reported 81 disappearances in Kandahar province alone during the period September 2011 to October 2012.⁴³ Persistent reports of people being tortured and killed have created a backlash “that local people say has fed support for the Taliban.”⁴⁴ Many Afghans are also of the view that the Afghan National Police (ANP), from senior Ministry of Interior officials to provincial and local staff, “are involved in the drug trade” and receive bribes to turn a blind eye to traffickers.⁴⁵ Protection provided by the ANP to those involved in the drug trade stands in sharp contrast to the treatment that women are often made to endure when they seek help from the police. Frequently, women are further victimized and held responsible for so-called moral crimes that include “running away from home,” as a result of domestic violence or forced marriage, or allegations of adultery including in instances of rape. Women are at risk of being sexually assaulted by ANP officers, who are ninety-nine per cent male.⁴⁶

Since 2005, Afghans are also at risk of rape, torture, theft, abduction and death at the hands of the Afghanistan Local Police (ALP), a creation of Washington that was initiated with the reluctant acquiescence of the Karzai Administration. Washington presented the ALP as a traditional mode of Afghan governance and an indigenous answer to the spreading insurgency. Afghan officials, however, were concerned about a proliferation of different armed groups that, initially, operated in parallel to Afghan security forces.⁴⁷ There are numerous reports of ALP-related atrocities including well-founded allegations of abuse involving the torture and death of ten villagers at the beginning of 2013 in Wardak.⁴⁸ Around the same time, there were credible reports of CIA-affiliated, covert Afghan units linked to Kabul’s National Directorate of Security (NDS) calling in questionable airstrikes that added to Afghanistan’s long list of civilian casualties.⁴⁹

The ALP was a key element of the COIN strategy of US General Petraeus who “modeled the program after the Sons of Iraq” initiative to counter Al Qaeda in 2007-2008.⁵⁰ In 2011, he said that the ALP was “arguably the most critical element in our effort to help Afghanistan develop the capacity to secure itself.”⁵¹ Just as Iraq in 2014 was confronted with a surge of armed militants who have thrived on the despair and disenfranchisement of Iraqis marginalized and persecuted by the Al Maliki government in Baghdad, Afghanistan in the coming years is likely to be challenged by the legacy of militarized politics including well-armed but poorly disciplined local militia and other armed groups.

The militarization of Afghan society, the clout of old and new-style warlords, rising levels of insecurity and widespread disenchantment with a discredited

governance apparatus are all part of the political geography that led to the debacle of the 2014 Presidential elections.

IV Bellwether Elections

Afghanistan's disputed, deadlocked, discredited and dispiriting election saga ended in a no-victor, no-vanquished deal that effectively discarded the (as yet unknown) results of the ballot box.

This presidential campaign commenced in September 2013 when those wishing to contest the elections submitted their nomination papers. It could be argued that the debilitating election saga began when the electoral laws were amended last year, giving President Karzai a strong say in the staffing of the two bodies charged with managing elections and arbitrating complaints. Allegations of systemic fraud orchestrated by the campaign staff of both presidential contenders include claims of manipulation and interference by government officials, ballot box stuffing, and interference by Karzai who allegedly meddled with the formation of different candidates' teams.⁵²

It remains unclear whether Ashraf Ghani will be seen as an elected President or the person in charge of a two-headed government that is the product of fraught, back-room negotiations. The deal, signed on September 21, was greatly shaped by the interventions of Washington, the UN, and the demands of the powerful strongmen who backed the competing presidential campaigns. It is too early to tell whether the new "Government of National Unity" will be able to operate in a cohesive fashion, but given the bitter tone of the accusations about the nature of the fraud, and brinkmanship surrounding efforts to tally the election results, this government will likely face many difficulties. Abdullah Abdullah claims that industrial-scale fraud robbed him of the Presidency. He will fill the new post of Chief Executive Officer that, in principle, will be similar to the role of a prime minister. Ghani and Abdullah will share or split responsibility for filling senior and other government positions, many of which have already been promised to key supporters.

Afghan citizens were acutely aware of the stakes involved in this election and the machinations that heightened the risk of ethnic strife or a resumption of the factional fighting of the early 1990s after the withdrawal of Soviet forces. More than 7 million citizens, or roughly 60 percent of those eligible to vote, cast their ballot in the first round of polling on April 5 in a massive repudiation of claims that Afghans are not ready for democracy.⁵³ Thirty-five percent of voters were female. Afghan voters defied harsh winter weather, insecurity, and threats from the Taliban to secure a democratic transition of power. But election day euphoria in April gave way to fear and dismay in the wake of the run-off poll in June, as the feud over fraud allegations became more bitter and dismissive of the voters' wishes. Thinly veiled threats of violence by northern militia leaders, the formation of a parallel government and the withdrawal of the Abdullah camp from a UN-supervised audit of fraudulent ballots, prompted negotiations for the formation of a "unity government." Most Afghans will heave a sigh of relief that the uncertainty and negative economic ramifications of the marathon election

process did not tear the country apart. But they are also acutely aware that John Kerry playing the role of kingmaker echoes too strongly of the selection of Karzai by Washington back in 2001.

Once again, Washington politics disregarded the wishes of the majority of Afghans in the name of stability, likely to be short-lived. Once again, Washington politics reinforced the grip of a warlord-dominated elite on the machinery of the state and exposed the hollowness of the US-led and UN-supported democratization state building project. Back in 2001, the dominant US and allied narrative stressed the importance of Afghanistan making a transition to a democratic mode of governance as an essential framework for peace, prosperity and a bulwark against extremism. Thirteen years later, Afghans are still dreaming of peace and prosperity, but it is clear that what was presented as democracy has not delivered. It is also clear that the Taliban and other armed groups have gained tremendously from a process that many see as a sham. It puts into question the value or relevance of a political system that claims to champion representative governance but ignores or obfuscates election results. It also puts into question the imposition of governance models that are inherently destabilizing, whatever the labeling or rationalizing involved.

A fundamental lesson of post 9/11 Afghanistan is that Afghans need to be in charge of *their* democratization process and shaping a future that genuinely allows for inclusive and legitimate governance. This includes engaging with the Taliban, building state institutions that serve the national interest, and developing a political culture that is democratic and fair from an Afghan perspective.

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