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## Local governance in Afghanistan: A solution to a failed state?

### I. Introduction

The collapse on 15<sup>th</sup> August 2021 of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, a semi-democratic-structured system, has challenged many political narratives, particularly in terms of nation-state building. The notion of state-building through a peacebuilding process in war-torn countries by the intervention of the international community dramatically led to a premature disintegration. The tragic death of a nation led to the exodus of tens of thousands of social activists, artists, bureaucrats, police officers, authors, journalists, athletes, etc. within weeks. The fragile state of Afghanistan was ruined so quickly that all Western intelligence services admitted they would never have been able to predict such a quick foundering.

In the last 50 years, Afghanistan once again witnessed a dramatic shift in its power structure and turned back to a state of instability and insecurity. The recent power change has introduced a new power broker, apparently seeking an ideological political structure which is not that of an Islamic Republic, but instead an Islamic Emirate. The Islamic Republic was theoretically based on elections through a democratic procedure, whereas the power structure in an Islamic Emirate is based on direct appointments by the Emir, the head of the state, who is a religious scholar. The Republic is assumed to be committed to global values, whereas the Emirate recruits Sharia or Islamic Law as its legal framework and does not necessarily see itself committed to international law. The source of legitimacy in the Emirate diverges from the Republic, rooted in the Quran and Islamic scripts.

In its final phase, the collapse of the Islamic Republic was territorially connected to the seizure of Kabul since other cities and remote villages and districts had already gradually come under the Taliban's control. Compared to the previous military strategy of the Taliban in the 1990s and even prior to 2014, which was focused on capturing the capital and central districts of provinces, the recent military game plan was concentrated on the seizure of remote villages and districts which were not properly connected to the Kabul administration.

Throughout Afghanistan's history, local communities have played a crucial role in the power structure in Kabul. Any failed inter-connectivity and meaningful relationship between local communities and the centre can challenge the capital in unmanageable ways. The Islamic Republic (2001-2021) experienced the same fate that the Soviet-backed Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (communist) went through in 1992.

This article intends to briefly investigate the importance of local governance in Afghanistan, a country with a huge diversity in terms of locality, ethnicity, religion, language and culture. It follows the hypothesis that the central state could survive the insurgencies if there existed efficient local governance.

### II. Afghanistan: A failed state

Afghanistan, which was optimistically viewed as a fragile state from 2001 to 2021, turned into a completely failed state within weeks. In his book *When States Fail*, Robert Rotberg defines that "a failed state is a polity that is no longer able or willing to perform the funda-

mental tasks of a nation-state in the modern world".<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the annual Failed States Index (FSI), published since 2005, details the characteristics of failed states and describes

*"41 sub-indicators of state failure (grouped into 12 categories) as diverse as: a) history of aggrieved communal groups based on recent or past injustices; b) 'brain drain'; c) institutionalised political exclusion; d) a drop in GNP; e) the appearance of private militias or guerrillas; f) increased corruption; g) higher poverty rates for some ethnic groups; h) human rights violations; i) fragmentation of ruling elites based on group lines, etc."*<sup>2</sup>

Regarding these criteria, Afghanistan has been a failed state throughout its contemporary history as there have been some ethnic groups which have historically experienced injustice, such as Uzbek, Turkmen, Baloch and Hazara communities, while there has existed an institutionalised political exclusion in all political formats from monarchy to Talibanism. For decades, the country has been suffering from poverty, corruption and brain drain.

The country was considered a failed state within the framework of international relations when the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks targeted the US, almost one decade after the end of the Cold War. "Afghanistan's apparent incapacity to control its territory and to locate and combat al-Qaeda lent new attention to the concept [of failed state]".<sup>3</sup>

Since the late nineteenth century, when modern nation-state building was a trend across the globe, Afghanistan has not been

able to develop a powerful central state. Some scholars assume that Abdurrahman Khan was the initiator of constructing a modern state in Afghanistan in the late nineteenth century, although there was not a specific territory for nation-state building. The southern border with the British-Indian Company was still a matter of conflict. In other words, the 2,400-km-long border was a buffer zone. The Abdurrahman policies of relocating non-Pashtun ethnic groups and the massacre of minorities, including Hazaras, were mistakenly seen as an attempt to build a central powerful state. Since the Abdurrahman era, the notion of a central state has been a continuously conflictual concept in Afghanistan politics.

Despite many issues, the problem can be traced to a fundamental but ignored societal phenomena: ultra-high diversity. The ethnic, lingual, and religious boundaries of communities are not as clear-cut as we suppose in Afghanistan's society. For example, not all Pashtun ethnic groups speak Pashtu; some are native speakers of Farsi. Not all Hazara ethnic groups are Shia; some are Sunni believers. In other words, the ethnic-lingual-religious characteristics of communities overlap, and the boundaries can be dynamically changed due to on-the-ground political issues. The outbreak of the civil war in the 1990s redefined ethno-lingual-religious identities and led to an extreme social polarisation.

However, "today Afghanistan boasts 45 languages, according to the summer Institute of Linguistics, spoken by a documented 55 ethnic groups".<sup>4</sup>

*"When Babur came upon the Hindukush mountains from Central Asia half a millennium ago, on his way*

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Call, *The Fallacy of the 'Failed State'*, 2008, 1499.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in Call, *The Fallacy of the 'Failed State'*, 2008, 1495.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Call, *The Fallacy of the 'Failed State'*, 2008, 1493.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Allan, *Defining Place and People in Afghanistan*, 2001.

*to establishing himself as the first emperor of the Mughal civilization in India, he remarked that he had never known a place to have so many 'tongues' i.e., languages. If the Babur anecdote conveys an idea of cultural complexity, a guide to Afghanistan's recent political disarray is demonstrated by the fact that it has had 17 different national flags in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – the greatest of any nation in the world.*<sup>5</sup>

In the twentieth century, the institutionalised marginalisation of non-Pashtun ethnic groups was intensified by the notion of locality and rurality as well. The capital Kabul was a place where families of the Pashtun monarchy and middle-class bureaucrats had centralised political power. The remaining ethnic groups settled in rural areas with low-level living standards. During the reign of King Zaher, several rebellions broke out in rural communities far away from Kabul. All insurgencies in Afghanistan's contemporary history can be analysed in the framework of centre-periphery conflicts.

### III. A centre-periphery conflict

Although Johan Galtung shaped the centre-periphery model to describe the "dominance system" of imperialism in the context of international relations,<sup>6</sup> the theory can provide tools to study social changes and social conflicts within communities as well.

*"This theory takes as its point of departure two of the most glaring facts about the world: the tremendous inequality within and between nations in almost all aspects of human living conditions, including the power to decide over those living conditions;*

*and the resistance of this inequality to change. The world consists of "centre" and "periphery" nations; in turn, each nation has its centres and periphery."*<sup>7</sup>

In the twentieth century, the power structure in Kabul was homogeneously restricted to a specific ethnic group and oligarch families. The accumulation of power and wealth in the hands of a group of royal families and urban bureaucrats was every so often the source of conflicts between Kabul and other parts of the country.

As a result, all other social groups were marginalised – firstly by their territory and then by their ethnicity, religion, and language – and pushed toward peripheries. The marginalisation of non-Pashtun ethnic groups was intensified by systemic discrimination, which was applied by the central state in the process of nation-state building in the twentieth century, particularly after the ouster of King Amanullah, who had seemingly been willing to enact equalising social reforms.

To describe the tense interconnectivity between geographical factors (locality) and ethnicity, Nigel J. R. Allan notes:

*"Major and minor ethnic groups have been shut out of representation in the government, largely because they lived in remote regions of Afghanistan, far from Kabul. This inequality enabled the Pashtun monarchy, backed by their kinfolk, to exert hegemonic control over military, clergy, judiciary, commercial and civil authorities in Kabul throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century."*<sup>8</sup>

In other words, the clash between Kabul as the centre of political power, with access to

<sup>5</sup> Cited in Allan, *Defining Place and People in Afghanistan*, 2001, 545.

<sup>6</sup> Galtung, *A Structural Theory of Imperialism*, 1971.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 81.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Hossaini, *Locality and Power: A Methodological Approach to Afghan Rural Politics*, 2019, 50.

resources, and rural areas without access has not merely been a rural-urban clash, but rather a multidimensional conflict rooted in ethnicity, language, culture, territory, and religious sects. The centre has applied, over the time, a dominance system over under-developed rural communities.

The central state has never been able to regulate an efficient, communal, and functional relationship with villages and remote districts. “The central state, whether in the form of a monarchy, republic or communist state, has not been able to bring local communities under its control”.<sup>9</sup>

During the reign of Nadir Shah and his son King Mohammad Zahir Shah, a semi-feudal governing system operated in Afghanistan for half a century, under which the central state had local representatives in all administrative zones. The representatives, who benefited from the monopoly of power, were not accountable to local people. They were tasked with controlling their territories and collecting and delivering taxes to the capital. In short, the relations between the centre and local communities were restricted to the relations between the monarchy and several strongmen in different regions of the country. It should be mentioned that at the time the country was suffering severe drought, due to which more than 100,000 people died<sup>10</sup> within a three-year period, mostly in rural areas.

It appears that the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan followed the same plan of previous regimes in dealing with local communities, making attempts to expand its authority domain through bureaucracy in its

Weberian concept without constructing a meaningful relationship.<sup>11</sup>

#### IV. Local governance and democracy

Before investigating how the central state approached local communities and local governance in the post-Taliban era from 2001 to 2021, it might be useful to clarify what we are talking about when we refer to local governance.

Local governance is defined as “the systems, institution and processes through which local authorities interact with, and provide services to citizens and other forms of association”.<sup>12</sup>

The concept can be frequently confused with the notion of local government, which basically represents the state authority. To put it another way, local governance can be viewed as the result of progressive changes that occurred within the concept of local government. While local government operates to expand state authority as part of the administrative apparatus, local governance concentrates more on ideas such as local citizenship, plurality, local legitimacy, self-governance, and democracy.

Local governance is also “the mechanism by which citizens themselves meaningfully articulate their interests and needs, mediate their differences, and exercise their rights and duties’ assuring democratic and inclusive decision-making with local participation”.<sup>13</sup>

This implies that local governance is not merely the mechanism by which the state expands its administration, but rather is a system in which different actors take part in the process of decision-making and self-

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 49. Afghanistan has seen several changes to its political structure: The Monarchy (King Mohammad Zahir Shah) 1958 – 1973; The Republic (Mohammad Davood) 1973-1978; The Communist Regime 1978 – 1992; The Islamic State (Mujahedin) 1992 -1996; The Islamic Emirate (Taliban) 1996 – 2001; The Islamic Republic (Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani) 2001 -2021; The Islamic Emirate (Taliban) 2021 – ongoing.

<sup>10</sup> Gall, *Mohammad Zahir Shah*, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> “For Weber, bureaucracy is the typical form of rational-legal domination, where authority results from rules; and bureaucracy is a system of rules and not of people.” Cited in Ferreira and Serpa, *Rationalization and Bureaucracy: Ideal-type Bureaucracy by Max Weber*, 2019, 187.

<sup>12</sup> Ogawa, *Towards Sustainable Local Governance in Afghanistan*, 2014, 21.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 21.

governance. The plurality of actors and the localisation of policymaking based on local interests advance toward decentralisation of power in local communities.

For instance, Michael Goldsmith who is in favour of dividing Europe into northern and southern blocs, recruits Edward Page's division to expand his idea. Page distinguishes the localism in Europe into two different groups of "legal localism" and "political localism".<sup>14</sup> "Using this distinction Goldsmith suggests that [some countries] reflect a form of legal localism in which there is a general belief in the value of local self-governance and decentralization".<sup>15</sup> From this point of view, local governance generates local autonomy to some extent.

However, local self-governance operated in everyday life touches the Foucauldian concept of micropower, which is exercised by individuals in their everyday life. Michel Foucault discusses power in the context of everyday life and views "people" as the main actors of power relationships in a community. He notes that "individuals [...] are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation [...] the vehicle of power, not its points of application".<sup>16</sup>

Nevertheless, the plurality of actors, localisation of policymaking, local legitimacy and self-governance in communities seem to be the principal characteristics of efficient local governance.

Considering this definition, the next part intends to investigate how the Islamic Republic

of Afghanistan could expand the concept in an ultra-diverse society.

## V. The Islamic Republic and local governance

From 2001 to 2021, the government of Afghanistan followed two major programmes to enhance the level of rural-urban (Kabul) relationships: the National Solidarity Program (NSP) and the Independent Directorate of Local Governance.

Global indexes show that Afghanistan's government apparently accomplished achievements in expanding its administrative apparatus across rural communities. In 2017, the World Bank Local Governance index indicates that the Afghanistan's rating stood at 0.04, reaching 0.46 by 2018. The score was scaled to range from 0 (lowest rating) to 1 (highest rating).<sup>17</sup> Afghanistan gained a medium score, which meant Afghanistan is "a country that has elected governments but where those governments are subordinate to unelected officials at the local level perhaps appointed by a higher-level body".<sup>18</sup>

The assessment of the World Bank sounds true if we assume local elections as the key element of good local governance. There existed many so-called elected councils in villages and districts. The National Solidarity Program established a Community Development Council (CDC) in almost all Afghan villages. The members of the CDCs were elected by community members, although the election process was not necessarily democratic. The election of the CDC members in small rural communities was based on a type of communal compromise among local

<sup>14</sup> Page, *Localism and Centralism*, 1991.

<sup>15</sup> Andrew and Goldsmith, *From Local Government to Local Governance-and Beyond?*, 1998, 108.

<sup>16</sup> Cited in Cheater, *Power in the Postmodern Era; Empowerment and Disempowerment in Changing Structures*, 2005, 3.

<sup>17</sup> The World Bank Index highest score would be accord to a "country in which local governments are elected and able to operate without restrictions from unelected actors at the local level with the exception of judicial bodies". World Bank, *Local Governance Index*, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

power brokers. The CDC members were supposed to consult and decide on the development budget, which was paid by international donors through the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development.

In addition to the CDC, there existed two more elected bodies or councils at local level: district councils and provincial councils.

All three local elected bodies would have been crucial for Afghan democracy if they could have enhanced political participation and promoted local citizenship. John Stuart Mill argues that “local elected institutions are an essential element in a democratic system of government because they widen opportunities for political participation as well as providing for the education citizens in the practice of politics and government”.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, he believes that “an elected government was necessary because of its ability to oversee the affairs of the locality, based on local knowledge, interest and expertise, and makes it more likely that efficient and effective local services will be provided than by other agencies and certainly by a distant central government.”<sup>20</sup>

As mentioned above, the electoral procedure was not as democratic as demanded by officials in Kabul and international donors. In small remote villages where customary organisations such as the Elders Council<sup>21</sup> or religious institutions are active, holding fair elections seems impossible. Moreover, the CDC members do not see themselves accountable to their local community or even to the central government. Although “local accountability might be improved by increasing the autonomy of local elected governments,”<sup>22</sup> there was not any

mechanism for securing accountability and transparency in rural communities.

The lack of transparency in spending the development budget empowered traditional power brokers in many cases, and in some led to the creation of new power brokers who enjoyed beneficial relationships with district or provincial governors.

All three local level councils were designed to enhance political participation and self-governance at local level. In theory, the NSP and the IDLG were presumed to be operating well in promoting local governance through local elections, local councils, local policy-making processes etc., but the functionality of these local bodies was considerably restricted in practice. As special representatives of the president, provincial governors had autonomous power to influence all subordinates, whether elected or unelected ones. The relationship between the local institutions and the state can be briefly described as below:

*“The creation of IDLG and the 2010 Subnational Governance Policy are key achievements in the development of local government. In practice, however, representative local government has not been given any meaningful power. Provincial governors have wide-ranging powers and are only accountable to the president, while district administrations are in effect sub-offices of the provincial administration. Central line ministries retain substantial control over resources. The power of provincial councils remains restricted, and they are initially accountable to the IDLG.”*<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Andrew and Goldsmith, *From Local Government to Local Governance-and Beyond?*, 1998, 108.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> A traditional council consists of old-male members of a community.

<sup>22</sup> Andrew and Goldsmith, *From Local Government to Local Governance-and Beyond?*, 1998, 112.

<sup>23</sup> Saltmarshe and Medhi, *Local Governance in Afghanistan: A View from the Ground*, 2011, 4.

Despite the creation of local bodies by the government, it seems that rural communities were strongly under the influence of an individual directly appointed by the president. Compared to previous regimes in which the rural-urban relationship was based on governmental organisations, this deal between the centre and periphery was much more centralised in the hand of one person. Provincial governors had the monopoly over development projects and political arrangements at the local level. As a result, the power structure was easily able to neutralise all attempts to expand democracy through the enhancement of local political participation, plurality, accountability, local citizenship and local self-governance.

## VI. After the collapse

After the collapse of the Islamic Republic, neither domestic neither international organisations are active in rural areas. There is no direct access to local areas to investigate how communities deal with the lack of development budget in the absence of NSP and international NGOs. But there are some reports which shed light on the issue in terms of local governance and conflict.

It appears that in the absence of official institution, local communities are approaching to traditional customary organisations, e.g., the traditional council of Shura and religious bodies. However, the recovered traditional bodies will not identically represent the pre-2001 traditional bodies because new power brokers emerged during the last 20 years who had access to new power resources like development budgets.

Another consequence of the recent power change in Kabul is the emergence of rural-rural conflicts which break out between locals or local and externals. Reports show that in

some parts of Afghanistan, local people who belong mostly to non-Pashtun ethnic groups are forced to migrate. Pro-Taliban villagers and nomads have forced Hazara local people in the central Afghanistan, and Tajiks and Turkmens in the northern parts to leave their houses without resistance. The New York Times reports:

*“The marginalization and displacement of ethnic minorities in order to seize their arable land. Taliban leaders have long persecuted and antagonized the Hazaras, a mostly Shiite minority, and in recent months, the new government has watched as local strongmen evicted hundreds of families”.*<sup>24</sup>

If the Taliban, as the new central state, does not stop its forced-migration policy, the rural-rural dispute on land will reshape itself and converts to another centre-periphery conflict. Rural communities with no access to judicial or executive bodies are trying to utilize all facilities to raise their voice for receiving support and advocacy. They use telecommunication tools to send their messages to the Emirate leaders as well as to the World. For instance, in September 2021, a group of villagers recorded mobile videos in two Dari and Pashtu languages calling the Taliban’s leaders to consider the situation in their village where strongmen connected to the local Taliban, forced them to leave their houses without touching any single property. They sent the video messages to media outlets, particularly those which station out of the country, like Afghanistan International TV which is based in London and began its broadcast on the day of the Kabul collapse.

Such attempts by community members can be viewed as a sign of self-governance, self-regulation, and social resilience.

<sup>24</sup> Gibbons-Neff and Akbary, *In Afghanistan, Who Has the Guns Gets the Land*, 2021.

This communication strategy probably is seemingly developed in urban communities which could quickly convert their mobile phone into a soft weapon. For example, since the collapse of the country, the Taliban has banned the presence of women in public and restricted their activities at schools, universities, and governmental

offices. As a result, women initiated indoor demonstrations to raise their voice. In the last three months under the dominance of the Taliban, a remarkable number of videos have been recorded from indoor demonstrations by women and sent to media outlets or posted on social media.

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