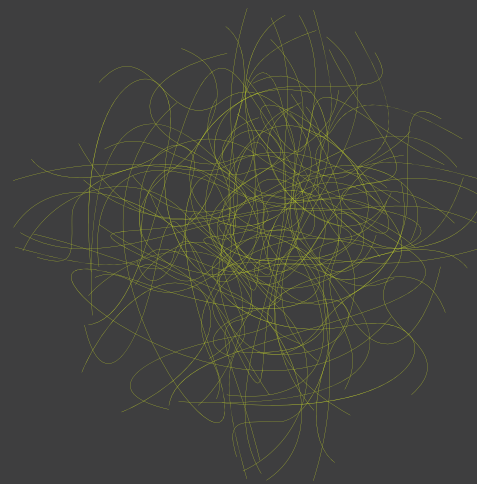


**Sources of Tension
in Afghanistan and
Pakistan: A Regional
Perspective**

**The Political
Landscape of
Afghanistan and
the Presidential
Election of 2014**

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February 2014



CIDOB Policy Research Project

CIDOB

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With support from



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THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF AFGHANISTAN AND THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OF 2014

Malaiz Daud

Independent analyst

Malaiz Daud is a political analyst with an M.A. in Post-War Recovery from the University of York. A Chevening and OSI scholar and a Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) fellow, he has worked for both governmental agencies and NGOs. He was one of the organizers of Afghanistan's Constitutional Loya Jirga in 2004 and the Kabul Conference in 2010. Malaiz has also headed Afghan Development Association (ADA) and Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) in Afghanistan. He is a founding member of the Afghan Youth Foundation for Unity (AYFU) and Young Leaders Forum (YLF).

INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan's upheavals have been a result of many factors. Abject poverty, being landlocked, a hostile region, clash of modernists and traditionalists, weak states, interventions by superpowers, presence of foreign non-state actors and an illicit narco-economy are but a few to mention. The country continues to reel from the effects of colonial constructs of the British and Russian empires of the nineteenth century, a devastating proxy war between the Soviet Union and the US and its western allies in 1980s, an atrocious civil war in 1990s, followed by being an international terrorists' safe haven, the current presence of international military forces, and the all-too-real prospect of another war between the Taliban on the one side and the international military forces and the Afghan government on the other side. Furthermore, its rulers and their organizations have a mixed record in politics and governance. In consequence, it is unsurprising that the country has experienced the emergence and presence of a broad array of political groups and parties, some nascent and some centuries old.

In order to make sense of Afghanistan's current situation, it is necessary to understand the political landscape of the country. A look at the past and present of the political forces in the country will contribute to establishing the extent to which local political actors are determinants in the direction the country is going to take in the near future. It will also help explain why the country stands where it is today.

The literature on elitism is indicative of the fact that post-war societies serve as the contestation grounds for political and economic elites, with little or no regard to the common man. Afghanistan presents an intriguing case, as to whether or not the heavy presence of international actors has altered this equation; and whether there will be any changes once the international military forces are withdrawn from the country. A key test of this notion will be the coming April's presidential election.

This paper explores and discusses the current political landscape of Afghanistan, with reference to the upcoming presidential election. The paper is nested in the internal discussions, political positioning and consequent arrangements that are taking place in the run up to the election. The paper's findings are based on a study of primary and secondary literature, the knowledge and contacts of the author and discussions the author had with members of the Afghan elite in late 2013 in Kabul.

The paper is mainly divided into two parts. Part One sheds light on the political actors of Afghanistan, their motives, forms, history, strengths and areas of presence. Part Two examines the five major electoral tickets (that is, the notable presidential candidates) out of the eleven running.

Part One presents a number of scenarios. The first section provides a brief historical account of the types of political actors and forces that have existed in Afghanistan over the past half a century since it is these forces that are still shaping the politics of the country. The second section looks at "who is who" in the current Afghan political scene. This section presents the origins of each set of political forces, their composition, and current motives and estimated degree of power.

In Part Two, the tickets of five presidential candidates who are considered the main contenders for the presidency and their running mates are analysed in the light of discussions and jockeying for position that is taking place in the elite circles of Afghanistan.

The paper concludes with an identification of the trends and issues that are regarded as critical to political actors and forces in post-2014 Afghanistan.

PART ONE: THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE OF AFGHANISTAN

Background and Composition

Afghanistan's political landscape is as much a culmination of its historical events of both the distant and not so distant past as of the post-Taliban policies of the Americans and their allies and decisions of Afghan political elite. To a lesser extent, countries in the region have also had a role to play. The latter is illustrated by the eminent support the Afghan insurgency derives from Pakistan – and to a lesser extent from Iran.

While the polity today is more akin to Afghanistan of the early/mid 19th century, the main powerbrokers, political movements/alliances, groups/parties and military units have their roots in the 1950s and 60s or 1980s and 90s. According to Christine Noelle-Karimi, Afghanistan was effectively divided into several principalities as the *Durrani-Sadozai* empire was dwindling at the dawn of the 19th century. After the first Amir of *Durrani-Mohammadzais*, Dost Mohammad Khan,

succeeded the *Sadozais* to the throne of Kabul, his control barely exceeded beyond Kohistan in the north, Kabul to the west, Jalalabad to the east and Ghazni in the south. The *Durrani-Sadozai* Empire during its greatest expansion ruled Nishapur (Eastern Iran) in the west, Karshmir, Punjab and Sind in the east (divided between India and Pakistan today). Not only were all the aforesaid regions lost in early 19th century, even regions part of today's Afghanistan were in control of different power-holders. Afghanistan's Amir was only nominally obeyed outside the fiefdom of Kabul. Noelle-Karimi contends:

*"His [Dost Mohammad Khan's] half brothers, the Sardars of Qandahar, controlled a principality of equal size in the southern Afghanistan, while Herat became the dominion of Shah Mahmud and his son Kamran. During the same period the Uzbek Khanates of Lesser Turkistan reasserted their independence. Eastern Turkistan, including Badakhshan, was the scene of a continuously changing balance of power between the Muitan and Qataghan Uzbek chiefs. Further west, in the so-called Chahar Wilayat, the Maimana held a leading position"*¹.

The abovementioned arrangement to a certain extent resembles the current political landscape of Afghanistan, which Conrad Schetter and Rainer Glassner call the *"Peripheralization of the Centre"*². It, however, more closely resembles Afghanistan during the civil war era of 1992-96. The trend could also be observed in the communist era, as several local powerful militia commanders, such as General Abdul Rashid Dostum in the north and Esmat Muslim in the south, exerted influence over periphery in certain regions. It is noteworthy that even Taliban had to enter such an arrangement with the likes of the *Haqqani* network. The regional power-holders are one of the key components of the existing power setup. These power-holders are mainly related to the Islamic parties that fought against the Soviet forces, with the exception of Dostum, who was a sympathiser of the leftist, People Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA).

The Dominant Currents

There are two currents that dominate the political landscape in Afghanistan today, a primary and a secondary one. Both include formal and informal actors and institutions.

The former predominantly hails from the political movements and groups that were formed during the so-called decade of democracy, 1964-73. Afghanistan officially became a constitutional monarchy through the 1964 *Loya Jirga* and held two multi-party parliamentary elections in 1965 and 1969. Of the political groups contesting for parliamentary seats, two ideological loosely-interconnected opposition networks emerged, that also did relatively well in the elections – the leftists and the Islamists. These two would go on to dominate the Afghan political scene from 1978 onwards. The same holds true today. The pro-Russian leftists that took power in a putsch in 1978 established a Stalinist regime and not only came down hard on the royalists and the Islamists, but also cracked down the anti-Russian or not-pro-Russian leftist groups such as *Sholais* and *Setamis* - the

1. Noelle-Karimi (1997), p. 290.
2. Schetter and Glassner (2009).

former being a Maoist group, the latter struggling for national justice. The Islamists were mainly divided into Sunni and Shi'a groups with the former based in Pakistan and the latter in Iran. They were further divided into thirteen parties or *tanzims* – seven Sunni and eight Shi'a – once in exile.

It is worth noting though that the trend of starting political movements and groupings had begun much earlier, in late 1940s and early 1950s, which Thomas Ruttig calls the “*first democratic period*”³. It started with Pashtun⁴ intellectuals coming together to promote their language, Pashto, but evolved into a reformist movement to include some non-Pashtuns later on. Despite the fact that these first political parties – “better labelled ‘*party nuclei*’ (Wahedi) or ‘*proto-parties*’ (Boyko) – in Afghan history were multi-ethnic, based on political issues, they soon split along ethnic lines, “*a major fault-line that would continue to haunt the Afghan reformist movement*”⁵, according to Ruttig.

Today, President Karzai, his two deputies, the vast majority of his cabinet members, provincial governors and all the way down to district governors have past or present links mostly to the above-mentioned thirteen Mujahideen parties. Some remnants of the pro-Russian People Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) have also occupied positions of power or boast a large following. Among these, General Abdul Rashid Dostum is the most powerful. Although his membership of PDPA is contested, he certainly was a sympathizer or at the very least, a “client”⁶ of the PDPA. Because the Bonn Conference of 2001 – where it all began – included mainly four groups; The so-called Northern Alliance⁷, the Rome⁸, the pro-Iranian Cyprus⁹ and pro-Pakistan Peshawar¹⁰ groups, these groups still wield considerable power inside and outside the government, especially the Northern Alliance. Although the pro-former King Zahir Shah Rome Group still has some individuals in the high governmental positions, *tanzims* from the Northern Alliance are in reality the only parties that can genuinely lay claim to having popular support.

On the other hand, a number of other groups, networks, alliances and movements, either newly-established or with some prior history are relevant as well, but play second fiddle to the primary powerbrokers mentioned above.

Civil Society, Traditional Community Councils, Technocrats & the New Democrats

The secondary current in the political scene of Afghanistan include a loose network of civil society actors, mostly based in the major urban centres, and local traditional community councils in their different forms and manifestations, that are mainly based in the rural areas. While civil society actors are a relatively new phenomenon, the latter have a long history in Afghanistan. And then there are the so-called technocrats, who are either Afghan returnees from the west (some, but not all with links to the four groups represented in the Bonn Conference); or prominent individuals from the Afghan NGO community that was mainly based in Pakistan with operations in Afghanistan

3. Ruttig (2006), p. 4.
4. The largest ethnic group in Afghanistan and the third largest in Pakistan. BBC recently put percentage of major ethnic groups of Afghanistan as follows: Pashtun (42%), Tajik (27%), Hazara (9%) and Uzbek (9%). Link here: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-26007023>
5. Ruttig (2006), p. 4.
6. H. Sinno (2008), p. 125.
7. Officially the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, a conglomerate of mainly non-Pashtun groups from the north of the country.
8. One of the longest serving heads of state in the history of modern Afghanistan (1933-1973), former King Zahir Shah settled down in Rome after being ousted from power by his cousin, Daud Khan, in 1973. The Rome Group was made up from the supporters of the former King.
9. Led by the son-in-law of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, leader of *Hizb-e-Islami*, who was based in Iran during Taliban rule. Hekmatyar is leading a smaller faction of the insurgency at present.
10. Led by Pir Syed Ahmad Gillani, a moderate Mujahideen leader.

prior to the collapse of Taliban rule. Prominent amongst these two groups are presidential candidates Ashraf Ghani and Zalmay Rassoul and former and sitting ministers such as Haneef Atmar, Jelani Popal, Ehsan Zia, Wais Barmak and Asif Rahimi. Finally, come the “new democrats”¹¹, who are either offshoots or disgruntled members of the leftist and moderate Mujahideen groups or an entirely new breed of political activists.

While the new democrats came to the fore in the post-Taliban era, there were underground democratic movements in the late 1990s that were already active, though limited by the fear of reprisal by the oppressive Taliban government. Many such groups were also formed in exile both in neighbouring and western countries.

Not all political groups in Afghanistan are officially registered. There are, nonetheless, 48 political parties currently registered with the Afghan Ministry of Justice, almost all of which fall in the aforesaid primary and secondary groups of political actors.

Who is Who?

In order to understand the current political landscape of Afghanistan, it is important to provide a description of history, goals and power of the following eight clusters of political actors.

1. ***The Islamists***
2. ***The Leftists***
3. ***The New Democrats***
4. ***The Civil Society***
5. ***The Traditional Structures***
6. ***The Clergy***
7. ***The Technocrats***
8. ***The Overlords***

The following table gives a snapshot of each category of actors. It precedes more detailed description of each group.

11. Ruttig (2006), p. 33.

Group	Motives	Status	Issues	Strategies	Electoral Tickets
Islamists	Establishment of a truly Islamic state	The most powerful political entity across the country. Even the insurgency is comprised of splinter groups and former Mujahideen parties. Most of the regional and local powerbrokers and holders are members of the so-called Jehadi tanzims.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Relevance of Mujahideen to the current and any future military/political setup - Holding on to the economic resources, both licit and illicit - Furthering ethnocentric interests - Safeguarding Islamic "values and practices" - Limiting "western" influences 	Primarily using rewards, intimidation and threats of physical violence	Part of Dr. Abdullah Ghani, Dr. Ashraf Ghani, Dr. Zalmay Rassoul and Abdul Rab Rasool Sayyaf's tickets
The Leftists	Establishment of a socialist secular state (past), ensuring a moderate polity (present)	Almost defunct public support. Holding on to some positions of power, especially in the security apparatus.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Remaining attached to the main power-holders - Trying to shun their past affiliations and by that extension the ideology 	Falling back on their expertise that are still in demand to stay relevant	Prominent only in Dr. Ghani's ticket
The New Democrats	Establishment of a genuine democratic state	Still at the periphery of power structures. Devoid of resources to mobilize masses of people and lacking charismatic individuals in their leadership.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Finding space for genuine participation of people in politics - Striving to survive with almost no financial basis 	Appealing to the international community without much success for help and support	None
Civil Society	Strengthening western-style democracy	A key player in the urban centres. Media the most powerful component.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Making efforts to ensure long-term presence even after the withdrawal of international military forces by aligning with international actors - Continued external funding - Linking up with like-minded politicians 	Establishing close links with international actors, using international media as a pressure tool. Maintaining close contact with like-minded political forces and individuals to advance their goals.	Divided between supporting all tickets apart from that of Sayyaf
Traditional Structures	Ensuring self-rule	Strong in rural Afghanistan, especially in the southeast where Jirgas are still key political institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Remaining competitive in the new political order with a number of other actors - Weathering challenges from formal institutions - Ensuring legitimacy by representing respective masses 	Relying on community support. Refraining from befriending or opposing any party to the conflict.	No visible or direct role. Only Dr. Ghani has openly claimed to have coordinated his candidacy with the shura of his Ahmadzai tribe
Clergy	Making the society a truly Islamic one	Influential amongst masses, not directly involved in politics or holding political positions but linked to those in power, exerting influence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Curtailing the open spaces to continue wielding power - Facing off with the democratic forces over influence in the society - Rendering notions such as democracy, freedom of speech, women's rights and etc as alien and anti-Islamic 	Using religious instructions to justify their positions and discredit opponents.	No visible presence
The Technocrats	Balancing power through decreasing the role of the Islamists, Leftists and Overlords	Powerful due to the presence of the international community. Holding several high-level government positions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Curbing the influence of competitors, especially the overlords - Remaining relevant on the highest level despite not having real popular support 	Using international goodwill and contacts as well as advanced skills of governance and management to stay in power.	Leading the Dr. Ghani and Dr. Rassoul's tickets and part of Qayoom Karzai's ticket
The Overlords	Ensuring a great degree of autonomy from central authority to safeguard and expand their economic interests and political influence	Main powerbrokers both in the centre and periphery. Have the financial muscle and political acumen to pull strings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fending off against encroachments from the government in their economic and political activities - Creation and retaining a geographical sphere of uncontested control 	Using fear and intimidation tactics to limit the role of others. Remodelling themselves and renewing their image, at least at the face of it, to appeal to the international community and progressive forces inside the country	Leading the Sayyaf ticket. Part of Dr. Ghani, and Dr. Abdullah's tickets

1. *The Islamists*

The current Islamic forces gained prominence during the Afghan war against the Soviets. With arms and funding supplied by the USA and Saudi Arabia, the groups fought a successful *Jihad* after the communist coup of 1978. The groups' anti-state campaign had, however, started years earlier. They initially formed as political entities in the 1950s and 60s. While some were inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood movement of Egypt, others were the result of the Islamist circles of the local clergy. On the Shi'a front, a cultural renaissance after the World War II and Iranian influences resulted in the foundation of a number of Shi'a religious political movements.

Islamic groups successfully campaigned and entered parliament in 1965. This prompted the government to reportedly rig parliamentary elections of 1969 with a repressive campaign against the Islamists to follow. The situation was made even more dire for them, after the monarchy was toppled by Prince Daud Khan with the help of the leftist groups, especially PDPA. Under pressure, their leaders fled to Pakistan. The Pakistanis in turn instrumentalized them into a proxy force to wage a violent uprising against the Afghan government. Pakistani government and armed forces rued Afghan government's alleged support to the Pashtun and Baluch insurgents. The Afghan Islamists attempted a failed uprising with the help of Pakistanis in July of 1975. The uprising was led by the future Mujahideen leaders, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Ahmd Shah Massoud and Burhanuddin Rabbani¹². The failure triggered an internal rift within the Islamist movement. Initially, Hekmatyar broke away, eventually seven Mujahideen parties came into being. Members of these seven parties not only fought the Soviets but also amongst each other and some went on to form the Taliban movement during the civil strife of 1990s.

The Sunni-Shi'a Split

After the PDPA's coup of 1978 and the subsequent Soviet invasion of 1979, the Islamist forces became a key component of the western strategy for curbing the influence of the Eastern Bloc. The Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI) of Pakistani army became the conduit between the Afghan Mujahideen and the American and Saudi funders. At that time, Pakistan was ruled by General Zia-ul-Haq, a military dictator who saw the Sunni Islamic groups not only as strategic assets against the Soviets, but also as a force to counter Shi'a and nationalistic tendencies in Afghanistan. The ISI abstained from supporting the nationalist leftist resistance movements, who increasingly became marginalized. Afghan intellectuals and tribal leaders were categorically targeted with reportedly hundreds assassinated in Pakistan¹³. From there, the majority of the (Afghan) Shi'a Islamic groups relocated to Iran, organizing themselves into eight parties. The (Afghan) Sunni groups split into seven main parties, four of which were considered hardliners and three as moderates.

From this point onward, the development of the parties became increasingly ethnocentric. They also established regional "turfs" in the areas where their respective ethnicities were strong. Although rising ethnic tensions were not only to be blamed on the Islamist parties since the Leftists had also exacerbated the ethnic fault-lines¹⁴, the divides panned out into full-blown conflict after the Mujahideen took power in 1991. It

12. Kakar (1997), p. 89-90.

13. Girardet (2011), p. 198.

14. Please refer to Aziz Hakimi's paper for more information: http://www.cidob.org/en/publications/stap_rp/policy_research_papers/the_changing_nature_of_power_and_sovereignty_in_afghanistan

was during this period that serious human rights violations took places against civilians, in part due to their ethnic affiliations.

2. The Leftists

The most powerful of the leftist groups was the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) which was set up in 1960s after several study groups of Marxist inclinations, which Thomas Ruttig calls the "first organised units"¹⁵, merged together. This current further split into the predominantly Pashtun wing of *Khalq* and Tajik/non-Pashtun wing of *Parcham*. The two rivalled each other for power throughout the so-called communist rule. There were several splinter groups later like the *Setam-e-Melli* which considered the question of "national" injustice more important than the "class" inequality.

Furthermore, *Shola-e-Jawed* was a "Maoist" movement that split into several factions, some of which became part of the resistance against the PDPA government. Finally, there was a group of moderate leftist parties. The current Pashtun nationalist party, *Afghan Millat*, which actually is the Afghan Social Democratic Party was one of them. These moderate leftist parties were, however, brutally crushed by the PDPA regime. They were also sidelined by the Mujahideen. Thus, they never became major players in the Afghan politics.

Ethnicity also appeared as an important associational denominator in the leftist groups. Collapse of the Najibullah government can partly be blamed by inter-ethnic rivalries. His opponents from the more hard-line *Parcham* faction of the former President, Babrak Karmal, increasingly used ethnocentric rhetoric to justify Najeebullah's removal in the days before Mujahideen took over: one example being: "*Pashtuns have ruled the country for two hundred years, now it is our turn to rule them for two hundred years*"¹⁶. This split was all more visible when the non-Pashtun PDPA members sided with the predominantly Tajik *Jamiat-e-Islami* and the Pashtun members with the predominantly Pashtun *Hizb-e-Islami*, after Najibullah's resignation.

3. The New Democrats

During the Taliban rule, a number of political groups were formed both inside and outside of Afghanistan who pledged their commitment to tenets of democracy and human rights. One such group, the Republican Party of Afghanistan, declared the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as their charter. In exile, the biggest Afghan community in Europe was based in Germany and it also was the most active, establishing several movements and parties with a commitment to democratic values.

After 9/11, these new democratic groups would feature in the new political landscape of Afghanistan along with the newly-established like-minded groups. Some of these groups were also represented in the Bonn Conference of 2001¹⁷. They were later given an observers' status in the conference but were completely excluded from the main political theatre after the Bonn conference, serving a blow to the democratic forces. Despite being highly motivated, there were divisions amongst them, which made it very difficult for them to survive in a polarised political and military environment. Their hope of support coming from democratic

15. Ruttig (2006), p. 6.

16. From author's discussions in Kabul. Source wishes to remain anonymous.

17. Thomas Ruttig recounts at least five such groups that had established links with the United Nations political office in Afghanistan prior to the Bonn Conference. Please see: http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_9674-544-2-30.pdf

countries never materialised and they are nowhere to be seen in the current political system¹⁸ despite the fact they still congregate and organize in the hope of making a comeback.

4. Civil Society

Although many social associations and a great number of NGOs were active in Afghanistan pre-2001, civil society as a term and notion to define these groups was only introduced after the ouster of Taliban. The main USAID-funded project for the Afghan civil society, which is implemented by the Counterpart International (CI), has included professional interest organizations, Community Development Councils (CDCs), local education committees, *Shuras*, community, youth and women focused organizations in its categorization of civil society organizations in Afghanistan¹⁹. This definition of the Afghan civil society is too narrow, because it doesn't include traditional civil society actors and institutions that have had an important role in the society and politics. These include local councils (*Shuras* and *Jirgas*) and religious actors and institutions such as mosques, *madrasas* and religious leaders²⁰. This set of organizations and institutions are much more resilient and powerful than the formal civil society. And they have projected themselves more potently on the politics in Afghanistan in the last four decades. In the words of Aziz Hakimi, Afghanistan is the country of "*militant Mullahs*"²¹ today.

The section of civil society that came into being as a result of the newly-found freedoms due to the presence of the international community is the Afghan media. The BBC estimates that "*by late 2011 there were 75 terrestrial TV stations, 175 FM radios and hundreds of press titles, operating under a wide range of ownerships - from the government, provincial political-military powers and private owners to foreign and NGO sponsors*".²²

Whilst historically the civil society organizations provided basic services in the absence of a functioning state, more recently they have expanded their role to promote western liberal values such as human rights, freedom of speech, political participation, etc. They have also participated directly in politics by working towards a democratic form of governance. From the Bonn Conference to the Emergency and Constitutional *Loya Jirgas* (grand assemblies), to the presidential and parliamentary elections, civil society actors were present in all of the recent political processes in some form and shape.

In the run up to this year's presidential election, civil society actors have reportedly been very active in the current electoral cycle. Several civil society stalwarts have thrown their weight behind different candidates. Some are actively campaigning, while a number are increasingly using the resources at their disposal to help their favourite candidates. The phenomenon is not altogether new as in the past there have been strong links between some NGOs and the government, earning the former the label of the government-organised NGOs (GONGOs).

The media has been one of the focus areas for the candidates who have tried to court major outlets – Tolo, TV1 and Shamshad TV are said to be in demand. It is reported that at one point a leading candidate spent two

18. Ruttig (2013)b.
19. Charney et al. (2011), p. 6.
20. Borchgrevink et al. (2007), p. 1.
21. Hakimi (2012), p. 4.
22. BBC (2013).

hours with the owner of Tolo TV over Skype, to get him drop his alleged support for another leading candidate. The Moby group that owns Tolo TV has been swinging from camp to camp, seemingly weighing its options. A number of civil society activists and owners of major media outlets have reportedly sought and been consequently directed by President Karzai as to where their support should go.

5. Traditional Community Councils

Traditionally, both *Jirgas* and *Shuras* have served numerous purposes, depending on what a particular context has demanded. They have been the platforms for conflict resolution or transformation. They have also been the primary mechanisms for practicing rule and authority within a particular geographical area – a jurisdiction²³. *Jirga* and *Shuras*' decisions transcend local boundaries and serve to clarify policies vis a vis other communities and the government²⁴. "*Jirga is a forum where Pashtoon men meet as equals, in a truly Greek form of democracy, to discuss problems, resolve disputes and make decisions*"²⁵. Of late, these traditional councils have increasingly become subservient to the interests of local commanders though.

In the aftermath of the Taliban collapse, *Shuras* and *Jirgas* have at times participated in the development programs of the government and donors. But they have also faced competition from institutions created by the government and the donors to rival their influence: Community Development Councils (CDCs) were thought to eventually replace these traditional institutions. Their role in politics, nonetheless, is what counts. *Jirga/Shura* landscape is not even. In some places they can be very influential; in others, they may only have an advisory role. There are even places where they are the sole decision-making bodies. They are the strongest in the south eastern provinces of Khost, Paktia and Paktika and parts of the central Ghazni province. In the immediate withdrawal of Taliban from the said provinces, *Jirgas* took charge of the affairs until central authority was restored²⁶. They also produce political leaders and help propel them to the national level, making them a player in the national political scene.

6. The Clergy

Opinions are divided whether or not there is a genuine clergy in Afghanistan. There are often distinctions made between the *Mullahs* (leaders of mosque prayers) and *Ulema* (Islamic scholars). Yet the *Mullahs* tenaciously consider themselves as *Ulema*. Opponents of Taliban (Taliban are actually *Mullahs*) have recently tried to undermine the insurgency by emphasising Taliban are not the religious authority to invoke Jihad. Historically, clergy/*Mullahs* have played an important role in the Afghan politics. Religious leaders participated in all British-Afghan wars, fought against the Soviets and are leading the current insurgency – Taliban leadership is predominantly made up of *Mullahs*. Leaders of a number of Mujahideen parties were either *Mullahs* or Islamic scholars. Religious leaders and organizations stand accused of grave human rights violations in the last four decades. Most of them are also corrupt and are involved in committing crimes at community level such as sexual abuse of children who are attending religious studies in mosques and *madrasas*.

23. Gohar (2006), p.39.

24. Barfield (2003), p.7.

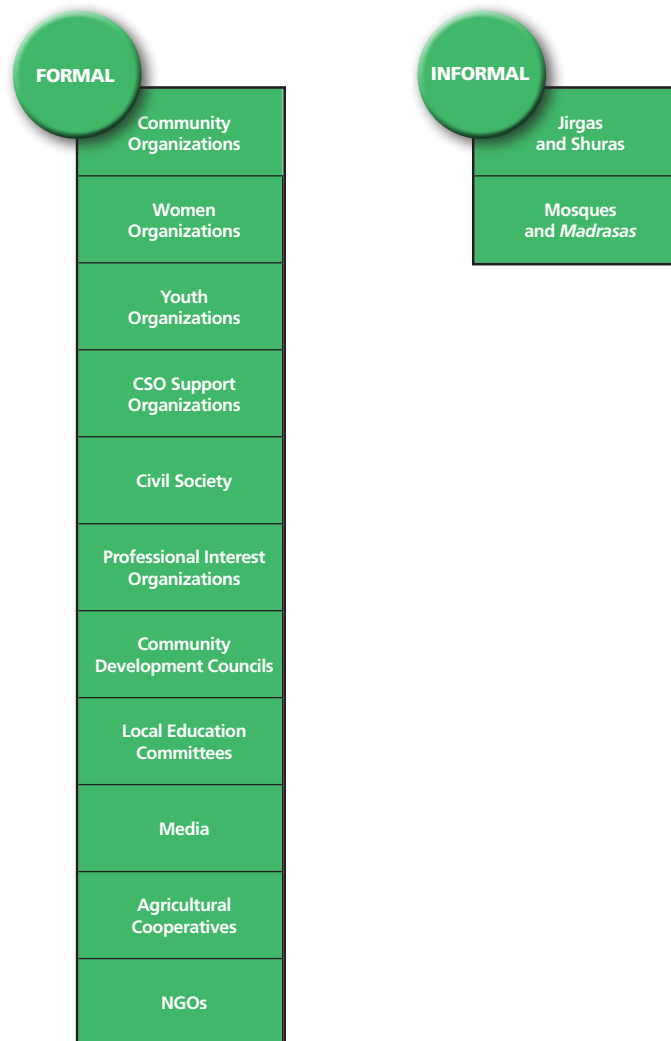
25. Gohar and Barfield in Chopan (2008), p. 50.

26. Clark (2011).

Afghanistan’s current Religious Scholars Council or *Shura-i-Ulema* is an influential entity. There are reportedly around 175 thousand mosques across the country. Religious leaders use these mosques and the *madrasas* to deliver political messages, mobilize people and provide commentary on social and political issues. Friday prayers are popular with Mullahs, an opportunity for them to voice their opinions. Some of these Mullahs have large following. Technology has made their messages reach other parts of the country or even other countries, thus diversifying their audience.

Religious leaders also use their clout and position of authority to mediate between conflicting parties. They use religious teachings to settle disputes, something hardly contested in a deeply conservative and pious society. Moreover, religious entities have extensive networks of collection of charity which is then redistributed to poor and needy as the mosques and their Mullahs are generally better informed about the situation of individual families in the neighbourhoods they are located in²⁷.

Figure 1: Structure of the Afghan Civil Society and its different components



27. Borchgrevink et al. (2007), p. 2.

7. The Technocrats

Afghanistan became devoid of its manpower due to consecutive wars and a concerted effort by ISI-linked groups such as *Hizb-e-Islami* and Taliban to assassinate Afghan intellectuals and elites both in Pakistan and inside Afghanistan. Several waves of brain-drain took place between 1978 and 2001, Western Europe, America, Canada, Australia and Russia being the main destinations. Presence of the international community in the past thirteen years has paved the way for many Afghans to return for jobs. More importantly, many Afghans adept at understanding institutional arrangements of donor countries joined the American-led foray. The international community looked for Afghans with the right skill-sets from day one.

Availing the opportunity, there were three strands of this set of actors that entered the political fold. The first one was made up of loyalists of the former King who was to play a father-figure role to the newly-established state. Dr. Zalmay Rassoul, a presidential candidate, is one of the last remnants of this category. The rest either retired back to exile or are too old to continue.

Secondly, the UN and the US employed a number of Afghans as advisors during the Bonn Conference. Dr. Ashraf Ghani and Zalmay Khalilzad became the most well-known of this badge. Both went on to play important roles in shaping the country's policies and politics. They remain deeply engaged to date. One of Ghani's first attempts at statebuilding was to bring in fresh blood, people who had the knowledge and capacity to transform the government. He brought a few from the US and then turned to the Afghan NGO community.

It was the Afghan NGO community that provided the third strand of the Technocrats. From it, Ghani picked Haneef Atmar and Masoom Stanekzai to become Ministers of Rural Rehabilitation and Development and Communications respectively. Atmar and Stanekzai further dipped into the NGO community to get technical support for their ministries. Their aides went on to assume important roles in the coming years. Asef Rahimi became Minister of Agriculture, Ehsan Zia Minister of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, and Amirzai Sangin Minister of Communications. All of the latter continued to surround themselves with more people from the NGOs.

These three sets of individuals came to be known as the "Technocrats" who are an integral part of the current political setup.

8. The Overlords

The war against the Soviets not only strengthened the Islamic parties but also gave birth to a few powerful battlefield commanders on both sides of the war. As the war wore on, the communist government became more and more dependent on militia commanders. On the other side, absence of Mujahideen party leaders from the battlefield paved the way for field commanders to become stronger. These commanders went on to play an important role during the civil war and resistance against the Taliban together with the remaining militia commanders from the communist era. Gul Agha Sherzai of Kandahar, General Abdul Rashid Dostum from the Uzbek community, Atta Mohammad Noor of Balkh and Ismail Khan of

Herat are some of these powerful individuals who remain so today. They have both the means and popular support to swing events in their favour. They also became instrumental in the US's "War on Terror"²⁸.

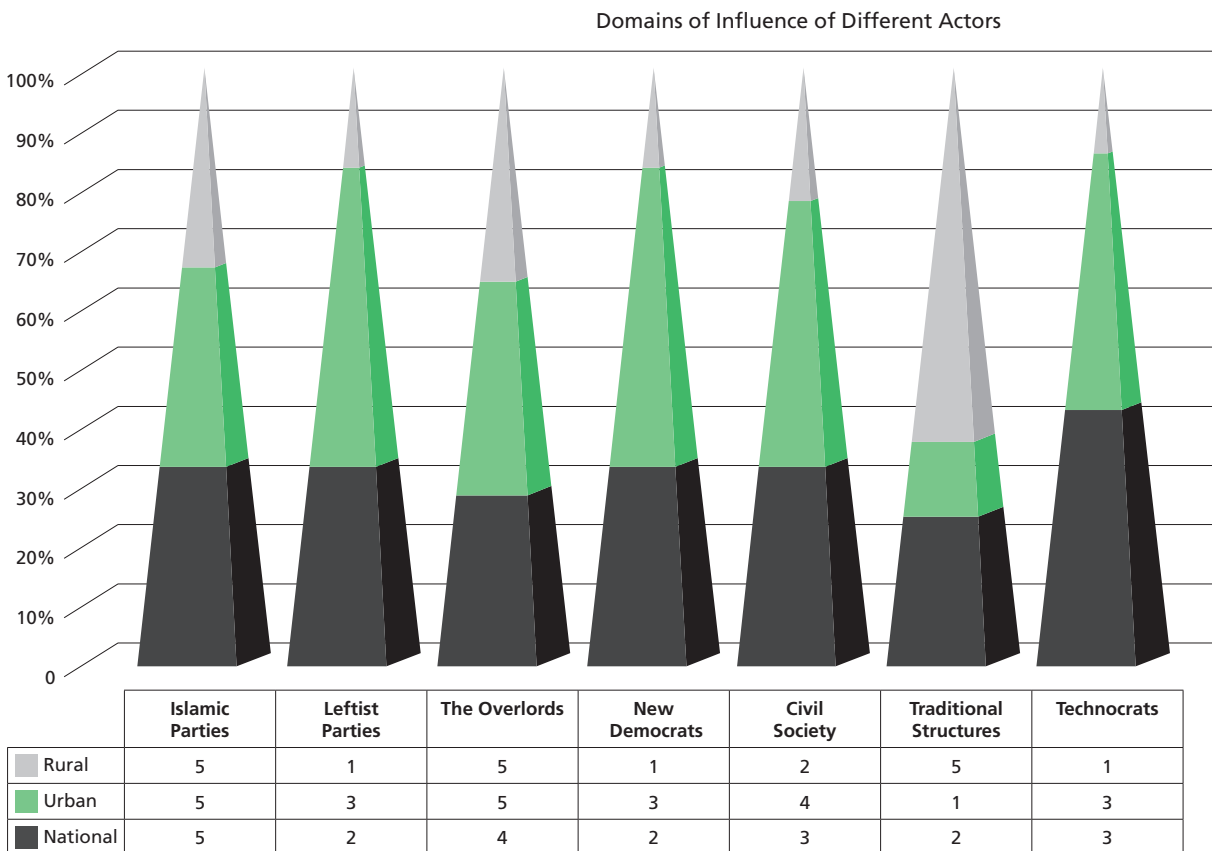
The Americans went on to create new militia in their war against Al Qaeda and Taliban, thus creating more regional overlords. They banked on Abdul Wali Karzai, the younger half brother of President Karzai, in Kandahar and Matiullah Khan in Uruzgan. Assadullah Khalid became the most powerful person in Ghazni, whereas Bacha Khan Zadran failed to create an impression in Paktia. The strategy failed or backfired in the south-eastern provinces of Paktia, Paktika and Khost where local *Jirgas* are still strong, not allowing individuals to take their role.

The importance of these "Overlords" is that they not only have almost unchallenged rule over their respective areas, but they also have quotas in the central government: for example, the current Minister of Public Health was appointed on the recommendation of General Abdul Rashid Dostum. Secondly, these overlords not only wield political power, they have also managed to accumulate immense wealth, reportedly mainly through US contracts and from the drug trade.

The following chart provides an overview of the presumptive extent of influence of every group on national level, and in urban and rural areas on the scale of one to five, five being the highest level of influence.

28. MacGinty (2011), p. 91-115.

Figure 2: Influence of Groups by Setting



PART TWO: THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE APRIL 2014 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS & BEYOND

As analysts and commentators have scrambled to predict the likely outcome of this year's presidential election, the discussion has largely centred on the process rather than outcome. Karzai's public embargo on supporting a specific candidate has left the field wide open.

Of the eleven tickets in the running, it is hard to look beyond five; the other six are largely ceremonial. Recent polls – questions remain about their credibility – suggest that former cabinet ministers, Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah are leading the pack so far.

There are also suggestions that election may not even produce a winner and that President Karzai may stay on for another couple of years. There was a gathering to support postponing elections in Kabul last year with thousands in attendance²⁹. President Karzai has remained adamant in public in his support for election to go ahead. The first scenario in this section refers to this possibility of Karzai's staying on in power.

A Messy and Frustratingly Lengthy Process – No Successor to President Karzai

In October last year, a senior cabinet minister admitted to the author that he could not see how the election will result in the first peaceful transition from one democratically-elected president to the next one. Looking through the list of registered, not yet vetted candidates, he professed that the election will be messy; the first round will see several candidates score almost the same number of votes and allegations of widespread fraud and intimidation will have scarred the electoral process. President Karzai will keep conveying the message that he will respect the outcome of the election, no matter what. He, however, will contend lower turnout in the areas marred by violence, raising questions about the legitimacy of the election.

Candidates in the meantime will keep fighting amongst each other. The process of counting the votes, and then responding to the complaints will take too long, because the Chief Prosecutor, the Supreme Court and even the Independent Commission for Overseeing the Implementation of Constitutional may become involved. There is precedence to such a lengthy process in the form of the parliamentary elections of 2010. People will become more and more wary and frustrated as the crucial year of 2014 will have many more important issues for them to be dealt with duly from security, to unemployment, to brain-drain. There will be too many uncertainties to solely focus on election. This will prompt some elite to ask President Karzai to stay on. His allies and aides will have also advocated for him to stay on for the sake of stability. Finally, he will budge to put an end to the lengthy and messy electoral saga.

The idea gained traction when it became obvious that most of the key tickets were engineered by the President. Several people were left puzzled after meeting him as each one was reportedly asked to back a different candidate. At a Cabinet Security Council Meeting, after completion of the candidates' registration process, he was said to have been pleased by the multi-ethnic nature of all tickets. However, on the flipside, it is argued

²⁹. For more information on the gathering: <http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/11788-postpone-presidential-election-until-2018-tribal-elders>

Karzai intentionally divided different groupings, chiefly “the Electoral Union of Afghanistan”³⁰, to make the election as messy as possible. For example, *Hizb-e-Islami* denied their ticket under Abdullah Abdullah was the work of Karzai. They even claimed the latter tried to sabotage their electoral alliance with Dr. Abdullah of *Jamiat-e-Islami*.

This scenario will have profound implications.

First, the international community may reconsider its support to the Afghan state should such a scenario unfold.

Second, internally, some groups will rush to be part of the new setup under Karzai, others will ferociously oppose it, resulting in further polarization.

Third, there may also be violent incidents or even emergence of pockets of territory governed by strongmen – not necessarily the north-south divide, because many northern groups will have joined the new administration – disillusioned by Karzai’s decision. These territories will essentially disobey the centre and reject its appointees.

The Electoral Tickets

(i) *The Technocrat-Warlord Ticket*

An anthropologist and a former World Bank advisor, Ashraf Ghani has built a reputation on the anti-corruption agenda. Therefore, his alliance with the former communist warlord and Uzbek militia commander, General Abdul Rashid Dostum, came as a big surprise. The ticket also includes a loyalist of the current second vice president, a Hazara by ethnicity. This ticket is widely speculated to have been put together after General Abdul Rashid Dostum failed to get the first vice presidency in Zalmay Rassoul’s camp. Once again, President Karzai is said to have been pivotal in getting Ghani and Dostum on the same ticket. It is also widely assumed that the Uzbek elite from all walks of life and political affiliations are steadfastly behind this ticket.

Ghani has been locked in a two-way race with Abdullah in the recent polls, both pulling clearly ahead of others. A recent poll by Asses, Transform, Reach (ATR) and Tolonews put Ghani second in the north³¹, thanks largely to Dostum. This ticket certainly has the potential to do well in the first round. It remains to be seen if Ghani can do well in the Pashtun areas, should Karzai refrain from backing him. The Uzbek votes and some Hazara votes alone will not be sufficient to win the election. Ghani is also enjoying some popularity in the urban centres. However, Dostum’s presence on this ticket has reportedly made urban youth have second thoughts.

There are two major issues with this ticket. First, history is against Ghani. He is a *Ghilzai* Pashtun and it is hard to see a *non-Durrani* Pashtun leading the country, whereas *Durrani*s have historically ruled Afghanistan. Secondly, there is neither a prominent Tajik on the ticket, nor visible in his close circle, raising questions among Tajiks for this ticket. If Ghani wins, it will be the first time in the post-Taliban era

30. Ruttig (2013)a.

31. Tolonews (2013).

that there will be no Tajik, and importantly no one from the powerful *Panjsheris*, in the top leadership of the country and should this happen, the Tajiks will certainly feel excluded.

(ii) *The Civil War Adversaries Ticket*

This ticket brings together three civil war adversarial groups, *Jamiat-e-Islami*, *Hizb-e-Islami* and *Wahdat-e-Islami*. Dr. Abdullah Abdullah's *Jamiat-e-Islami* fought the parties of both his vice presidential candidates between 1992 and 1996. Furthermore, there has been bad blood between *Jamiat* and *Hizb* for more than three decades. The ticket is claimed to have the backing of the militant wing of *Hizb-e-Islami* or in effect, of Gulbuddin Hikmatyar. A recent press release by Hekmatyar's party about participating in the election supports this claim³².

Abdullah has fared well in the polls so far. He is from the second generation of Mujahideen, meaning his moderate views may help his cause in the urban settings. There is no doubt he will garner a large number of votes in the predominantly Tajik areas. His second vice presidential candidate, Mohammad Mohaqeq, is a popular Hazara leader, so there is no question that a big chunk of Hazara vote will go to this ticket. Questions remain, however, as to how they will do in the Pashtun areas, despite his first vice presidential candidate, Muhammad Khan, being a Pashtun. It also remains to be seen how popular *Hizb-e-Islami* is, in the predominantly Pashtun areas, and in order to win the election, they will have to do well in the areas with sizeable Pashtun populations.

There are two major issues with this ticket as well. First, the ticket is spearheaded by a non-Pashtun. Modern Afghanistan has only been led for ten years by non-Pashtuns since its inception in 1774. The country may still be a long way from having a non-Pashtun as its leader. Abdullah's father was a Pashtun, but the problem is that he is widely seen as a non-Pashtun. The second issue is that the ticket brings back bitter memories of the civil war era, with the participating parties being the main protagonists of the civil war that resulted in the destruction of much of Kabul. If Abdullah wins, it will give the opportunity to Taliban and other insurgent groups to use the ethnic card for waging an anti-government campaign.

(iii) *The Popalzai Ticket*

As hard as it is to see a *non-Durrani* or a non-Pashtun leading the country, it is even harder to see a *Popalzai*, Hamed Karzai, relinquishing power to someone from a rival tribe from his home province of Kandahar. This notion makes President Karzai's brother, Qayum Karzai, the dark horse in this race. The President is on record as saying that he urged his older brother not to run in vain. Qayum Karzai is the only *Popalzai* left in the race, so if President Karzai decides to back someone from his tribe due to pressure from his tribal leaders, or pressure from rivals in Kandahar, he has no choice but to go for his brother.

Qayum Karzai is also rumoured to be backed by President Karzai's close ally and National Security Advisor, Dr. Rangin Dadfar Spanta. His vice presidential choices are well-known - but not necessarily popular. Furthermore, there

32. Received by email by the author. Also widely reported in media such as here: <http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/8193-hizb-e-islami-will-participate-in-election-if-transparent-adviser-says>

is no Tajik on this ticket either, which could be an impediment. Therefore, the only chance of this ticket doing well in the election is if President Karzai supports it.

(iv) *The Moderate Ticket*

Former Foreign Minister and National Security Advisor, Dr. Zalmay Rassoul, is considered by most to be a passive observer and a weak manager. That is the reason why everyone was surprised when he was touted as one of Karzai's favourite candidates. None the less, being a *Kandahari*, an ally of the deceased former King Zaher Shah, the nephew of the former reformist King Amanullah Khan, and part of the post-Taliban setup till his resignation in late 2013, he boasts the right credentials to lay a genuine claim to the top post in the country.

His ticket is the only one that has a woman and a former vice president on it. His first vice presidential candidate is the brother of the slain Northern Alliance commander, Ahmad Shah Massoud (a former vice president under Karzai from 2004-2009). However, he is said to command little or no influence in his native Panjsher, let alone amongst his ethnic Tajiks elsewhere. His reported involvement in embezzlement and corruption is a serious dent to his reputation³³, something he denies.

Contrary to reports, it is said there is a tacit understanding in place between the Moby Group/Tolo and Rassoul's camp, rather than Abdullah's camp. The owner of the Moby Group, Saad Mohseni is said to be one of Rassoul's main advisors. For a time, it was also rumoured that former Director General of the powerful Independent Directorate of Local Governance, Jelani Popal, was designated as Rassoul's campaign manager. Popal is very close to Karzai. However, it has surfaced now that Popal has gone to the US and Mirwais Yasini, First Deputy Speaker of the Parliament, is a joint campaign manager for Rassoul together with Waheed Omar, former spokesman of President Karzai. More importantly, the camp reportedly has the backing of Engineer Ebrahim, the Deputy National Security Advisor. Ebrahim is a trusted Karzai ally who is one of the facilitators of Karzai's network in the south and southwest. He is said to be sitting on the money of the presidential palace, including those flowing from the CIA and Iran. If Ebrahim's support to this ticket is confirmed, that will certainly point to where Karzai stands.

The problem with this ticket is that it is considered a weak team. It lacks the assertiveness of the likes of Ghani and Abdullah. Rassoul and Zia Massoud hardly have any clout anywhere in the country. More crucially though, Rasoul is a *Barekzai*. And it will be a bitter pill to swallow for *Popalzais* to see someone from their main rival tribe wrench power away from them. Will Karzai dismay or even anger his tribe, by backing Rassoul?

(v) *The Old Guard Ticket*

This could be another dark horse in the race. Abdul Rab Rasool Sayaf is a seasoned orator and a charismatic leader. He is the only candidate from the older generation of Mujahideen. Former Mujahideen are likely to feel more comfort from his presence, than from the presence of any other candidates

33. Steele, Jonathan and Boone, Jon (2010)

in this year's election. This ticket also includes the powerful Tajik former Mujahideen commander, Ismail Khan, from Herat. Khan is a stalwart of *Jamiat-e-Islami*. He has a solid vote bank in his native Herat and may well get many votes in the provinces adjacent to Herat.

The problem with this ticket is that it is widely seen as regressive. In particular, the young generation is unlikely to vote for it. In addition, it is hard to see how Sayyaf or his vice presidents will be able to manage relations with western allies, should they come out victorious. They are also seen as close to the Arab states and Iran, something which may go against them due to widespread anti-Arab and Iranian sentiments in Afghanistan. Specifically, however, this ticket may dent Abdullah's bid, with most of its votes likely to come from areas north and northwest of Kabul and the western provinces - areas previously inclined to vote for Abdullah.

CONCLUSIONS

Trends

There are some clear trends emerging pertaining to the current political landscape of Afghanistan that will have implications for the future of the political system and the constitutional order of the country. Afghan elite are a more cohesive unit now than they used to be immediately after the establishment of the Interim Authority in 2001. However, power struggle between the centre and the periphery is still going on and political groups largely revolve around ethnic affiliations. For the survival of all political groups, with the exception of insurgents, beyond 2014, strength and cohesiveness of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) is a key prerequisite. And key to survival of the ANSF is continued funding from the international community.

The Elite Alliance

During the Constitutional *Jirga* of 2004, the Technocrats and former warlords were clearly locked in a competition for power. Both sides tried to curb the influence of the other by the means of the new constitution. With cabinet slots of utmost importance to both sides, two conditions, each benefiting one side, prevailed: 1) Cabinet ministers are required by the Constitution to possess a university degree, something the former warlords were short of, and; 2) to be Afghan citizens holding no other nationality. Most of the Technocrats held dual nationalities. Tensions remained high between the first vice president Qaseem *Faheem* and Ashraf Ghani, who was at the time the Minister of Finance, the former being a former warlord and the latter holder of American nationality. They became the de facto leaders of the two camps in question.

Now, it seems both camps have turned a corner. Qaseem Faheem would reportedly request to be part of every meeting on security transition in 2010-11 "*so that he could learn from Ghani*". Ghani, on the other hand, would visit Amrullah Saleh when he was removed from his job as the head of the Afghan intelligence agency (Saleh was a member of the Northern Alliance). The thaw in relations has not only resulted in short-term fixes but also long-term solutions. The author and jour-

nalist Ahmed Rashid claims there is a realization even within Taliban leadership that they need the technocrats, if they were ever to return to power, to govern the country. It is this realization that forms the basis of the alliance between these one-time adversaries. Ghani and Zalmay Rassoul are supported by groups affiliated with the Northern Alliance. Wais Barmak, the Minister of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, is a Faheem loyalist, despite the fact that he was nurtured under the regime of the Technocrats. The Overlords, despite being very powerful, see the Technocrats as “indispensable” for the survival of the current political system, which ensures both sides thrive politically and economically.

This realization has also resulted in longer-term planning on the part of the former warlords who are keen on their sons, and in some cases, daughters getting education in the west, making the new generation of warlords a different breed altogether. It was reportedly Ashraf Ghani who facilitated the education of Faheem’s son first in the US and then in the UAE before the latter’s son was appointed in a key position in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Another manifestation of this arrangement is that ethnic lines have been blurred. Overlords and Technocrats of differing ethnicities have formed alliances, are following each others’ leads and are even becoming friends. The post-Taliban era was a learning process for everyone. It provided the space for leaders to express themselves and become acquainted with each other, thus resulting in downgraded suspicions. In the school of leadership studies, “inter-elite coalitions”³⁴ are considered key to progress and development. The trend is certainly emerging in the case of Afghanistan.

Periphery vs Centre

Right from the beginning, there was a competition between the Technocrats and the regional warlords over the centralization or devolution of power. The former strove for a more centralized authority so that they could wrench away power from the latter. The latter not only made every effort to retain as much power as possible in the periphery but also to make the periphery represented strongly on the national level. However, it was the former warlords who emerged victorious from the Bonn Conference. This gradually changed as the centre prevailed more and more. As was pointed out in Section One, the centre has been essentially “peripheralized”.

Ashraf Ghani was credited with the centralization of revenue. He is now professing that 40% of the national budget will be spent for reconstruction project in the rural areas³⁵, should he become the president. This will certainly give the regional Overlords a renewed impetus, something Ghani may find hard to digest. None the less, the trend of peripheralization still continues as the regional Overlords are potently part of the decision-making on the national level and they will certainly have a say on any future arrangements. Here the result of presidential election will be key to the balance of this intricate arrangement. If the election result is seen as a threat by the Overlords, they are likely to wage a campaign for a more devolved arrangement. If the result is in their interest, it may be “business as usual”.

34. Developmental Leadership Programme has conducted several studies on elite coalitions available here:<http://www.dlprog.org/>

35. Pajhwok (2013).

The Nuclei of Political Groupings: Still Based on Ethnic Affiliations

In spite of a positive trend in relations towards inter-ethnic tensions, ethnicity still remains an important factor in Afghan politics.

As it goes, even within ethnicities, tribal and family relations precede everything else. There is, however, a growing realization that in order to govern the country, multi-ethnic leadership is important. But the nuclei of the political groupings are still based on ethnicity.

It is not only the former warlords who resort to ethnic rhetoric from time to time: even the Technocrats, civil society activists and the new democrats use ethnicity as a way of staying relevant. It is reported that when Ashaf Ghani was first approached to run for the presidency, he claimed he had given that authority to his *Ahmadzai* tribal council. Zalmay Rassoul, on the other hand, is said to have tried to bring more Pashtuns into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, because he deemed them to be sidelined by his predecessors. Another former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Rangin Dadfar Spanta, famously proclaimed after losing his job in 2010: *"I have been accused of bringing many Heratis (he was from Herat province) to the ministry. I concur but there are still more Panjsheris (the dominant Tajik group from the Panjsher province) here"*³⁶.

Dependence of the System on the ANSF for Survival

The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are expected to remain intact as long as the funding from the international community continues. If the BSA is signed, they will have further training and equipment. The longer the ANSF stay intact, the more resilient and professional they will become. The CIA, on the other hand, is likely to keep operating through a number of smaller military units that may not necessarily be part of the ANSF. Support to these forces and their linkage to CIA are independent of the BSA or indeed of any other agreements between Afghanistan and its international allies. These forces will certainly be linked to political entities, mainly the Overlords, which means the current elite have a very good chance of survival post-2014. Therefore, it is conceivable that the political landscape of Afghanistan in the periphery will remain unchanged for some time to come. The Overlord-CIA alliance may not bode well for the democratic forces of Afghanistan as there may not be the needed transparency mechanisms in place for scrutinising the actions of this alliance, increasing the chances of rights abuses.

Critical Issues

The political landscape of Afghanistan will be shaped by a set of critical issues. These issues will also have profound implications for all sets of political actors. For the civil society and the pro-democracy forces, especially women, to prevail, preservation of the newly-found liberties is of utmost importance. While corruption undercuts legitimacy of all political entities, insurgency poses the greatest existential threat to everyone in the political arena.

³⁶. Source wishes to remain anonymous.

(i) Threats to Newly-Found Liberties

Civil Society

Civil society has thrived in the post-Taliban era. In that, it is very vocal in its support for the Bilateral Security Agreement with the USA. It knows that its currently maximized role could face a real threat in the post-2014 period.

It is feared that the media will suffer the most if there is actually a reversal in the progress made. Media's ability to investigate cases of graft and abuse against politicians may be curtailed and the independent media may even be persecuted. If democracy in Afghanistan is to succeed, a lot is riding on how the civil society fares post-2014. The position of the civil society will also determine the nature of the relationship between Afghanistan's future government/s and its/their western allies. If there is any backtracking on the role of civil society, it will mean an active set of actors losing their place in the polity of the country, effectively altering Afghanistan's political landscape. Given that major actors within the civil society have joined - or are passively supporting - one camp or another, their survival or lack of it will pretty much depend on who wins this year's election.

Women and Youth

Women and youth have enjoyed elevated roles in the current state. Afghanistan's parliament has one of the highest ratios of female participation in the world – even if their presence can be nominal at times. A number of young people have taken up important roles in the government, civil society and parliament. In a country where age matters, this is a source of tension. Women's role is also, at times, perceived as too intrusive and invasive by the conservative and traditional elements of the society. For example, there is a constant tussle between the clergy and women's rights activists over the limits of participation of women in the society. The electoral tickets disappointingly yield the presence of only a single woman out of the eleven. The only female presidential candidate was disqualified.

The international community, on the other hand, has placed conditionality for its support on how the women are treated. Norway has already retracted some funding in protest over what it saw as the unfair treatment of women³⁷. With women effectively having no public role during the Taliban era and a very limited one during that of the Mujahideen, we may well witness women losing ground in their new roles, in the future. Whether women will remain important actors in the Afghan polity is a question that is likely to give Afghan women activists sleepless nights. It will also result in a rearranged polity. All major presidential candidates have thus far tried to court women by targeted messaging. For example, Abdul Rab Rassoul Sayyaf – the most conservative of the candidates – cited a saying of Prophet Mohammad to highlight importance of women. He continued: "I think there are misconceptions in the public about my perspective on women's education. I support honourable education opportunities for women, because women's honour and dignity

³⁷. Reuters (2013).

are very important”³⁸. This, however, does not necessarily demonstrate presidential candidates’ genuine commitment to women’s participation in societal and political matters. While some have a track record of promoting women’s rights, others have yet to prove their dedication to strengthen women’s role in the society.

Corruption

Corruption has been a major driver of people’s disenchantment with the government for the past few years. Although the situation is not expected to improve as a result of the presidential election, continued corrupt practices will not bode well for Afghan politicians – both internally and externally. It will also keep on undermining the governing ability of the government. The insurgents may benefit from this, if they manage to steer clear of corrupt practices themselves – which however thus far they have failed to do³⁹.

Corruption will also make the state more predatory, thus adding to the suffering of the common people. The more corrupt the state gets, the more illegitimate it will become in the eyes of those it rules. Lack of legitimacy will, therefore, be a crucial issue for the current Afghan elite. With a decreased presence of the international community, Afghan political forces will shoulder the primary responsibility of serving their constituents. Will they be able to provide jobs and other sources of income? Will they share their wealth or proceedings from licit and illicit trades to buy off loyalty? Or will they engage in massive corruption and abuse with no regard to the common people? In any of those scenarios, which groups will have the resilience to withstand existential threats? Will clean and transparent forces lose out or thrive?

Insurgency

Insurgency poses a threat to every single political entity in the country.

The Taliban are still adamant, at least in public, on not compromising on their principles. In response to a question as to whether they will rule the same way as before if returned to power, their spokesman said “*Islamic law is a constant. Therefore, there will not be a change*”⁴⁰. It remains to be seen how long the insurgency persists. If the Taliban fail to have strategic victories, what will their leadership and rank and file’s response be? In the ungoverned (by the state) spaces, the Taliban have not allowed any political groups and actors to operate. They have also targeted the political and military leaders of their rivals, making them the biggest threat to the current setup. Therefore, if the status quo remains or the Taliban gain an upper hand in the war, we may well witness the demise of a number of political forces. Or will all the different political forces form a joint front against a common enemy, to stay relevant?

There is consequently a strong correlation between motives and strength of the insurgency and the shape and composition of Afghanistan’s political landscape, as the biggest existential threat to all the political actors comes from the insurgency.

38. Tolonews (2013).

39. Vocativ (2014).

40. BBC (2014).

Implications for the Regional Powers (Russia, India, Iran, China, Saudi Arabia)

Afghanistan's political landscape is a perfect scenario for the covert agendas of the five key regional powers - if they have any. As Ahmed Rashid says: "they can pick their horse [among the overlords] and run with it"⁴¹. In the case that the western powers fail to support the Afghan state, most political groups and individuals will look to the most-implicated countries in the region for support.

The outcome of this year's election is also vitally important for the region, because the stability of the political system is dependent on it. Regional countries will most likely continue their alliances inside Afghanistan, regardless of the results of the election. It is said Iran has already started distributing money among the candidates to buy future goodwill and loyalty. India has a stake in an open and democratic Afghan state that does not follow in the footsteps of Pakistan by becoming a hostage to religious fanatics. India will have an equally good chance with all of the leading candidates to be seen as an ally and a friend. Relations with Saudi Arabia are rarely part of the discussions in the lead up to the election and are not likely to feature prominently. China and Russia will have the added advantage of too big to ignore, so even if they are not liked, there will be respect for them.

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