

Political Party Development in Afghanistan: Challenges and Opportunities

While the buzz words of democracy [...] might work for some parties to justify their existence, they will not be able to create a mass movement unless they provide the public with a solid action plan accompanied by a supporting ideology that could bring about a change in the status quo

Ajmal Sham, President Afghan Mellat Party, *Frontier Post* (Peshewar) 2008

One of the major political challenges in Afghanistan during the coming years will be to develop effective and accountable political parties in a political context where the vast majority of Afghans, including President Karzai, strongly distrust and dislike them

Wilder, *AREU*, 2005

Ashley Elliot

'Policy Options for State-Building in Afghanistan' SAIS Spring 2009

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this paper is to (1) chart the historical evolution of political movements and parties in Afghanistan, (2) assess the position of political parties in the context of the post-Taliban political dispensation and (3) propose recommendations for moving towards a more robust and enduring role for political parties in the future. The paper presents the weaknesses and challenges facing contemporary political parties as an intensely political problem – citing the obfuscation of the Karzai regime in particular – requiring a correspondingly political solution resting on international recognition of the need for decisive action. The international community must focus on party development in addition to more technical questions pertaining to electoral and parliamentary process. This can be achieved by awarding greater recognition to the legislature, providing funding and improved training to political parties, pressuring the Karzai regime for a change in the electoral law and channelling international assistance for political party development through a single lead agency.

Introduction

This paper explores the condition of party politics in post-Taliban Afghanistan and considers the prospects for Afghan political parties in the face of the future. In doing so, it stands in danger of joining much of the contemporary policy debate on Afghanistan, which increasingly is cloaked by an air of unreality. How realistic is it to discuss the high politics of parliamentary process and party formation in the context of a state whose claim to rule over its territory is struggling to convince?

For example, in the light of a deteriorating security situation, the state's basic capacity to hold nationally representative elections in 2009 and 2010 is in "serious doubt."¹ 2008 was the most violent year in Afghanistan since 2001, with 31 per cent more incidents than 2007. According to one report, the Taliban now maintain a

¹ International Council on Security and Development (ICOS) 'Afghanistan's Presidential Election: Power to the People, or the Powerful?' (London) March 2009 p. 5; see also, Kippen, Grant 'Elections in 2009 and 2010: Technical and Contextual Challenges to Building Democracy in Afghanistan' Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (Kabul: AREU) November 2008 p. 5

permanent presence in 72 per cent of the country.² Given the sheer scale of security and capacity issues to be addressed as a precondition to sustaining political party development, this paper's recommendations may appear facile. As the following quotes suggest, such proposals must consider Afghanistan as it *actually* is and not according to *a priori* precepts of what democratization *ought* to be:

The government is being constructed in the midst of armed conflict, an immense dearth of education, and bleak poverty. Few in the country have a clear impression of what democracy [is] in actual fact.³

The cabinet and its decisions barely registered in the public consciousness. Ministers did not travel in the provinces unless they were taken there by U.S or NATO commanders. Pashtun elders described the cabinet as *waraktun*, or Karzai's kindergarten.⁴

As one member of Afghanistan's legislature, the Wolesi Jirga (WJ), suggested, "it will take at least a decade before people are educated and understand and support political parties."⁵ Yet even this prediction is premised on the assumption that general support for representative democracy will endure through the violence likely to come. If the situation worsens, or fails to improve, it may be understandable for Afghans to withhold support for an international experiment in democracy that has given them few reasons to warm to a "metaphysical idea that has yet to facilitate human security in their everyday lives."⁶

² International Council on Security and Development (ICOS) 'Afghanistan's Presidential Election: Power to the People, or the Powerful?' (London) March 2009, 2009 p. 7

³ Rippenburg, Carol J. 'Electoral Systems in a Divided Society: the Case of Afghanistan' British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, April 2007 p. 7

⁴ Rashid, Ahmed, 'Descent into Chaos: the United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia' Viking Adult Press 2008 p. 349

⁵ Wilder, Andrew 'A House Divided? Analysing the 2005 Afghan Elections' Afghanistan Research and Election Unit (Kabul: AREU) December 2005 p. 11

⁶ Tadjbakhsh, S. & Schoiswohl, M. 'Playing with Fire: the International Community's Democratization Experiment in Afghanistan' Journal of International Peacekeeping Vol. 15, Issue 2 2008 p. 264

Clearly, therefore, successful political party development will rest on a number of quite titanic prerequisites. The state must function first. Nevertheless, it is the central claim of this paper that many of the failures of Afghanistan's lost years since 2001 have been deeply political and require political solutions, including through political parties. Institutions structure incentives for political actors and institutions such as political parties can create incentives that act to stabilize the Afghan polity. External actors and the Government of Afghanistan (GoA) must address the question of political parties now if the prospect of a stable politics in the absence of heavy international assistance is to be realised in the future.⁷ For example, the Obama administration and its new envoy, Richard Holbrooke, must include political party assistance in their forthcoming 'civilian surge' scheduled for mid-2009.⁸

Why should political parties matter so keenly in Afghanistan's (post?) conflict environment? One answer is that their functions – representation, interest aggregation and articulation, recruitment of electoral candidates and the formation of government – cannot be fulfilled by other bodies such as civil society or private organizations.⁹ In democratic theory, political parties are ascribed the task of fusing the boundless individual wants and interests of citizens into collective platforms. For citizens, their role is to render the state less impersonal and the mechanics of representation more intelligible. By assimilating individual interests into blocs and representing these at the political centre, parties allow both elites and citizens to better comprehend the political

⁷ See Larson, Anna 'Afghanistan's New Democratic Parties: A Means to Organize Democratization?' Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (Kabul: AREU) March 2009

⁸ New York Times 'G.I.'s to Fill Civilian Gap to Rebuild Afghanistan' by Tom Shanker April 22 2009 <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/23/world/asia/23military.html>

⁹ Netherlands Institute for Multi-party Democracy (NIMD) 'Political Party Assistance in Post Conflict Societies' 2008 p. 16; retrieved in April 2009 at: <http://www.nimd.org/document/775/democracy-and-political-party-assistance-in-post-conflict-societies>

process. This is particularly apt in fragile environments with societies sharply divided along ethnic, regional or religious lines because political institutions become the most prominent, perhaps the only, channel of communication between different groups.¹⁰

For elites, parties can exert a disciplining influence in the legislature, placing MPs into recognizable groups and preventing the paralysis arising from a cacophony of individual demands and initiatives. Indeed, while it has failed substantively to do so thus far, the National Assembly in Afghanistan has the potential to exert this discipline and to act as a national forum for the nation's combined interest, drawing the regions to the centre in a way that has not happened in Afghan history.¹¹ This promise lies in the fact that the National Assembly is theoretically a powerful body, to which the president must seek approval to determine fundamental state policies. Indeed, the Wolesi Jirga (WJ) can force through legislation that the President does not sign, providing two thirds of its members agree.¹²

A second answer is that there are no effective alternatives to multi-partyism in modern democratic states. Representative democracy in the absence of interest aggregations tends towards instability, confusion, or worse – a conundrum that Afghanistan has already encountered from 2001-2009. In the wake of the Taliban's fall, early hopes were raised for a gradual progression towards a strong and plural party-political system.¹³ Since the parliamentary elections in 2005, however, such hopes have been traded for disillusion and resentment as perceptions of the legitimacy of the Karzai

¹⁰ Kippen, Grant *'Elections in 2009 and 2010: Technical and Contextual Challenges to Building Democracy in Afghanistan'* Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (Kabul: AREU) November 2008 p. 2

¹¹ International Crisis Group (ICG) *'Afghanistan's New Legislature: Making Democracy Work'* Asia Report Number 116 – (Kabul/Brussels) 15 May 2006 p. ii

¹² *Ibid*, p. 3; See also Article 94 of the Constitution

¹³ International Crisis Group (ICG) *'Political Parties in Afghanistan'* Policy Briefing (Kabul/Brussels) 2 June 2005, p. 1

government wane. In addition to a general failure to provide security and services, the government has sidelined political parties through its selection of the unsuitable Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) electoral system (see pages 22-23), which forswears proportional representation. As this paper will show, this anti-political party system implies that as grievances build, systemic opportunities for airing them remain absent. It was this stasis and intolerance of political opposition that fuelled Afghanistan's turbulent past in which conflict was resolved outside the ambit of formal political process. Afghan history reveals with sharp, terrible clarity the need to replace elite executive control with functioning political parties able to hold the government accountable on behalf of voters and be held accountable by party members.¹⁴

This is not a paper about political theory, but it is worth observing that the debate surrounding President Karzai's rejection of party politics has played out before in other young democracies groping their way through the political puzzle of securing effective representation. In the light of two centuries of American political history, it is easy to forget that one author of the Federalist Papers, James Madison, wished to limit the effects of political parties as dangerous to representative government. Yet if an analogy for contemporary Afghanistan is to be drawn from western political history, we ought perhaps to recall the experience of France from 1789-99.¹⁵ In America, the decisive debate over the proper system of representative government was conducted in relative calm at the end of the revolutionary turmoil and in the aftermath of the drawing up of the new constitution. And if ever a new nation was blessed by leaders of superior rank

¹⁴ Netherlands Institute for Multi-party Democracy (NIMD) *'Political Party Assistance in Post Conflict Societies'* 2008 p. 19

¹⁵ For a short account of the dilemma over suitable forms of political representation in this period, see: Runciman, David *'The Politics of Good Intentions: History, Fear and Hypocrisy in the New World Order'* Princeton University Press 2006 p. 166

through whom representative government could take root, it was the United States in the person of George Washington. In France, meanwhile, arguments over the constitution and modes of representation took place against a backdrop of paranoia in which the nation was increasingly under threat from within and without. And France was not so lucky: it got Napoleon Bonaparte, “the Terror, the chaos that followed the Terror, and then the arbitrarily controlled order that followed the chaos.”¹⁶

The point here is simply that building states on representative foundations has historically proven hard in circumstances where the state itself is threatened and the nation is not blessed with particularly talented leaders. This is where Afghanistan has found itself in 2009, with a welter of further problems alongside. It is worth remembering, therefore, that the singular lesson these historical precedents convey is that no system of government that seeks to preserve social diversity and political unity can survive without political parties to animate it.¹⁷ Aspects of History will certainly repeat themselves in Afghanistan, but there is no reason to repeat the folly of seeking to escape party politics by thinking that the division of power and the representation of the people can be secured through other means.

Notwithstanding the many challenges and disappointments, there are grounds for optimism looking ahead to Afghanistan’s 2011 parliamentary elections. For example, a good number of small new democratic parties with no links to Afghanistan’s violent past have surfaced in the post-Taliban political landscape. These parties may come to fill the longstanding moderate void in Afghan politics. The following paper duly discusses their origins and prospects. The article’s main purpose, however, is one of synthesis, drawing

¹⁶ Runciman, David *The Politics of Good Intentions: History, Fear and Hypocrisy in the New World Order* Princeton University Press 2006 p. 170

¹⁷ Ibid.p. 168

to together the research on post-Taliban political parties into a single document. Yet the paper is also in part polemic – pressing the argument that while ‘development’ and ‘security’ feature prominently in the contemporary debate over Afghan state-building, this obscures the fact that such issues will not decide the future of the Afghan state in the decisive medium term. What will matter when the heavy international presence is withdrawn, as is likely to occur within one (or at most two) U.S. electoral cycles, is whether the Afghan people view the state and its political institutions as legitimate.¹⁸

I. Background: the Origins of Afghanistan’s Political Parties

Just as Afghanistan historically has been squeezed between rival empires or great power interests, so the welter of external political and ideological influences have produced a domestic politics since the mid-20th century in which space for a moderate or unifying Afghan voice has been suffocated between Islamism and hard-line leftist modernizers.

The earliest attempts to organize politically occurred one century ago, during the first constitutionalist movement (1903-09) or *mashrutiat*.¹⁹ Yet political parties recognizing themselves as such emerged only in the mid-20th century. Thomas Ruttig usefully describes Afghanistan’s parties today as ‘proto parties’, reflecting their loose

¹⁸ For an illuminating insight into the ephemeral impact of externally-led effort to ‘win hearts and minds’, see Roberts, M. *Villages of the Moon: Psychological Operations in Southern Afghanistan* Publish America 2005; for a general expression of why externally-led liberal peace-building undermines the end it purports to serve, see Rubin, Barnett *Building a Republican Peace: Stabilizing States After War* International Security, Vol. 30 No. 4 Spring 2006 pp. 87-112; “Liberal peace-building might inadvertently be doing more harm than good” pp. 88-89; see also Ottaway, Marina & Lieven, Anatol *Rebuilding Afghanistan: Fantasy versus Reality* Carnegie Policy Brief No. 12 January 2002

¹⁹ Ruttig, Thomas *Islamists, Leftists, and a Void in the Centre: Afghanistan’s Political Parties and Where They Came From 1902-2006* Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Kabul) 2006 p. 1

structure and lack of coherent platform.²⁰ Allegiances among and within parties is fluid, “shifting according to the conviction of leaders rather than determined by a single ideology.”²¹ We do not yet know which will survive. Some parties, however, have shown resilience and continuity over decades.

In the 1940s, King Zahir Shah embarked on a modernizing program that included the first semblance of a democratic legislature, a rudimentary bureaucratic apparatus and nominal recognition of women’s rights. This new climate paved the way for a first generation of parties, of which only the ethno-nationalist *Afghan Millat* survives.²² This first cluster of parties anticipated the three main political currents that continue to exist today: the political-religious (Islamic) current, the communist Left and a variety of ethno-nationalists.²³

The constitution of 1964 awarded the right to form political parties, but after the law passed through the Parliament in 1968, the king failed to ratify it. During this period of hesitant political liberalization, a number of largely clandestine communist parties ‘in waiting’ emerged, with the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) at the forefront. By the mid-1970s, however, most parties had disappeared as the king’s successor, Sardar Mohammad Daoud Khan, cracked down on party development.²⁴ Daoud deployed the leftist parties against his Islamist rivals, leading new Islamist parties such as the *Jamiat Islami* to prominence in the role of an armed opposition.²⁵ Daoud then

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Larson, Anna ‘*Afghanistan’s New Democratic Parties: A Means to Organize Democratization?*’ Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (Kabul: AREU) March 2009 p. 5

²² National Democratic Institute (NDI) ‘*Political Party Assessment: Afghanistan*’ 2006 p. 3

²³ Ruttig, Thomas ‘*Islamists, Leftists, and a Void in the Centre: Afghanistan’s Political Parties and Where They Came From 1902-2006*’ Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Kabul) 2006 p. 1

²⁴ International Crisis Group (ICG) ‘*Political Parties in Afghanistan*’ Policy Briefing (Kabul/Brussels) 2 June 2005 p. 2

²⁵ National Democratic Institute (NDI) ‘*Political Party Assessment: Afghanistan*’ 2006 p. 3

turned on the PDPA, splitting the party (anticipating a long tradition of fission among Afghan political parties, the PDPA split into the Khalq (People) and Parcham (Flag) branches, named after their respective periodicals). From this point onwards, competition between parties of the left and Islamist ‘right’ was pursued through force of arms.

In the wake of the king’s overthrow in 1973 and especially after the Soviet intervention in 1979, numerous *mujahideen* parties appeared. Of these, seven became prominent in the resistance struggle through the backing of the Pakistani Inter-Services intelligence (ISI),²⁶ although the term ‘party’ is misleading: such groups functioned as military factions, split by cleavages of personality, ethnicity, tribe and religion.²⁷ It is also worth noting that only *after* the PDPA’s 7th Saur coup (or ‘Saur Revolution’) in 1978 and, in particular, after the Soviet invasion of Christmas 1979,²⁸ did Islamist parties attain real significance, drawing on the support of the USA, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan and consolidating their monopoly on the narrative of national resistance to foreign occupation.

During the anti-Soviet and inter-factional war the space for parties and movements narrowed.²⁹ In this milieu, leftist groups would ally with fundamentalist Islamists and conversely in order to consolidate power along geographic or ethnic lines.³⁰

Among the most enduring of these forces was the Uzbek-based *Junbesh-e-Milli* led by

²⁶ These were: Hezb-e Jamiat Islami Afghanistan under Burhanuddin Rabanni; Tanzim-e-Dawat, led by Abdul Rasul Sayyaf; Jabha-e-Najat commanded by Sibghatullah Mojadedi; Mahaz-e-Milli, led by Sayeed Ishaq Gailani; and two factions of Hezb-e Islami led by Gulbadin Hekmatyar and Yonus Khalis – many of these figures would go on to fight each other in the inter-factional war, only later to re-appear in Afghan politics after the fall of the Taliban

²⁷ National Democratic Institute (NDI) ‘*Political Party Assessment: Afghanistan*’ 2006, p. 3

²⁸ Ruttig, Thomas ‘*Islamists, Leftists, and a Void in the Centre: Afghanistan’s Political Parties and Where They Came From 1902-2006*’ Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Kabul) 2006 p. 10

²⁹ Following Ruttig, I label the ‘civil war’ of the early 1990s an inter-factional, because it was fought by relatively small groups of *tanzim* for absolute power and not between ‘groups of citizens.’ The wider population was tired of the fighting

³⁰ National Democratic Institute (NDI) ‘*Political Party Assessment: Afghanistan*’ 2006 p. 3

General Dostum which came to dominate the north-west of the country and successfully transformed into a political party in 2005.

What is salient about the 1980s and 1990s is that where parties existed, they did so in a rigidly Leninist format characterized by strict hierarchical and communication structures and dominated by one or two individuals. As we shall see, this legacy has informed contemporary practice in party politics, stifling, *inter alia*, the emergence of internal democracy and ensuring that few parties have traction beyond their leader's own instrumental purposes.³¹ The Leninist imperative is diametrically opposed to the model of an internally democratic party: whereas military structures require decisive command, political organizations also need consensus-building and inclusive decision-making processes. Changes from one form to the other can take years to achieve.

With the onset of President Najibullah's regime in 1986, Afghanistan entered a period of 'controlled democracy' in which formal space for political parties belied a system loaded in favour of PDPA rule. With the disintegration of PDPA government, parties retraced their tentative steps towards conventional party activities (for example, until the late 1980s, leftist parties had printed publications and established women's and youth movements), in favour of a singular pursuit of power by armed force. It is this period of inter-factional war and Taliban rule (1991-2001) in which parties brutalized civilian populations that informs contemporary public attitudes most decisively. Partly because parties are so leadership-orientated, it is the past record of the party and its

³¹ See, for example, Ruttig, Thomas 'Islamists, Leftists, and a Void in the Centre: Afghanistan's Political Parties and Where They Came From 1902-2006' Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Kabul) 2006 p. 1

leader(s) that make parties distinct in the eyes of the Afghan public – “once a *Hezbi*, always a *Hezbi*.”³²

Political Parties After the Taliban

Now something of a cliché, representative democracy is somewhat easier to obtain in programme than in substance. Nowhere is this more apparent than the difference between the impressive achievements since 2002 regarding the benchmarks of the Bonn Agreement and the slow progress over the formation of political parties. The Bonn conference of November 2001 set in train the Emergency Loya Jirga (ELJ) of June 2002 and subsequent Constitutional Loya Jirga (CLJ) in December 2003. With Presidential elections in 2004 and Parliamentary elections the following year – the first in more than three decades – Afghanistan entered into a new era characterised by presidential rule and a bicameral legislature. However, following the ratification of the Elections Law and Political Parties Law, political parties have remained fragmented, confused and ephemeral – obstructed by a wide array of systemic and contingent factors. While parties stir into action for elections, in the interim period, they remain largely idle.³³ No party with origins in the pre-Taliban period, for example, has held a public congress.³⁴

Political parties have corresponded to the three major political currents of previous eras – the Islamists, the left and the ethnic nationalists –, with the ‘new

³² Ruttig, Thomas ‘*Islamists, Leftists, and a Void in the Centre: Afghanistan’s Political Parties and Where They Came From 1902-2006*’ Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Kabul) 2006 p. 45

³³ Larson, Anna ‘*Afghanistan’s New Democratic Parties: A Means to Organize Democratization?*’ Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (Kabul) March 2009, p. 18

³⁴ A new democratic party, the ALDP, is the only party in post-Taliban Afghanistan in which a party leader has been voted out from his post but did not leave the party. See Ruttig, p. 34

democrats' emerging alongside (see pages 14-18). While the old *tanzim*³⁵ have tried to refashion their armed wings into respectable political parties, numerous splits and coalitions have prevented such factions from transferring wholesale into the multi-party era. These splits rarely belie programmatic differences but rather constitute 'vanity projects' stemming from the impatience of leaders who were "not the 'number one' in their old parties."³⁶

This fragmentation was also a reflection of the reality that political parties had few material or ideational incentives to offer prospective members. Most have few resources, power, or ability to provide tangible patronage. "It is usually individuals who win votes for parties, not parties that win votes for candidates."³⁷ These weaknesses are accentuated in Pashtun areas, where "nominate tribally powerful candidates can win [elections] based on their tribal rather than party vote."³⁸

The False Start at Bonn and the National Assembly (2005-Present)

Set out at the Bonn Conference and confirmed at the CLJ, a bicameral legislature was created in 2005 with a lower house, the more powerful and elected Wolesi Jirga, and an upper house, the Meshrano Jirga, to be appointed by elected provincial and district councils (two thirds) and the president (one third). Under the Political Parties Law, parties must register with the Office of Political Party Registration (OPPR) in the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) and are required to conform to the following criteria: parties

³⁵ *Mujahideen* armed factions – the phrase first came into use in the anti-Soviet war to describe the loose groupings organizing to oppose the occupation

³⁶ Ruttig, Thomas 'Islamists, Leftists, and a Void in the Centre: Afghanistan's Political Parties and Where They Came From 1902-2006' Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Kabul) 2006 p. 17

³⁷ Wilder, Andrew 'A House Divided? Analysing the 2005 Afghan Elections' Afghanistan Research and Election Unit (Kabul: AREU) December 2005 p. 9

³⁸ Ibid p. 9

must not pursue objectives contrary to Islam; use force; incite violence; disrespect public order; have military organizations or affiliations with armed forces; have been convicted of human rights violations; or receive funds from abroad.³⁹ Parties must possess a constitution and a minimum of 700 members. Election candidates may be independent or endorsed by a political party but parties may not place symbols on the ballots.⁴⁰

By 2005, more than 80 parties had emerged. As predicted, the Single-Non-Transferable-Vote (SNTV) system produced a highly fragmented National Assembly in the 2005 parliamentary elections. Only 12 per cent of the Wolesi Jirga candidates (381 out of 2381) registered under the name of a political party. However parties appear to wield more influence informally: approximately 200 out of the 249 MPs elected are thought to be members or sympathisers of political parties. These come from 33 political parties – 19 Islamic, 7 ‘new democratic,’ 4 leftist and 3 ethno-nationalist.⁴¹ Overall, parties with Pre-Taliban roots dominate the National Assembly. These old parties consist primarily of the seven *mujahideen* parties in preserved or splintered form, various Shia parties representing the Hazara group and regional factions, former communist parties and movements that emerged in opposition to the Taliban.⁴² The division of seats between old and new parties was recorded in a National Democratic Institute assessment as follows:

³⁹ Political Parties Law, Chapter Two, Article 6; the Political The Political Parties Law can be accessed at: <http://www.afghanembassykl.org/political-parties.pdf> ; see also, National Democratic Institute (NDI) ‘*Political Party Assessment: Afghanistan*’ 2006 p. 4

⁴⁰ International Crisis Group (ICG) ‘*Political Parties in Afghanistan*’ Policy Briefing (Kabul/Brussels) 2 June 2005 p. 2

⁴¹ Ruttig, Thomas ‘*Islamists, Leftists, and a Void in the Centre: Afghanistan’s Political Parties and Where They Came From 1902-2006*’ Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Kabul) 2006 p. 43

⁴² National Democratic Institute (NDI), ‘*Political Party Assessment: Afghanistan*’ 2006 p. 7

Old and New Parties in the National Assembly

Wolesi Jirga Seats

Party Origin Number of Parties (approximate)

Pre-Taliban	15	93-123
Post-Taliban	10	19-31

Source: National Democratic Institute (NDI), *Political Party Assessment: Afghanistan* 2006 p. 7

The lack of formal blocs has seen the power-brokers of past eras dominate the legislature, although it is perhaps unremarkable that “a predominantly conservative society has elected a predominantly conservative parliament [...] approximately 133 of the 249 WJ members fought in the jihad which suggests but does not guarantee a conservative outlook.”⁴³ Amongst the old parties, Islamists have clearly emerged stronger than the ex-communists. The ex-PDPA is now more divided than ever, split between at least 15 registered parties led by former PDPA officials. In part, this reflects the dilemma over ideological legitimacy facing all communist parties after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Some parties now claim that they have left the past behind them; others assert that they were never communists but patriots, describing themselves as “non-ideological.”⁴⁴

Should this dominance by pre-Taliban (largely Islamist) parties be surprising in light of the widespread attribution of blame accorded to such parties for the violence of the early 1990s? A comparative glance at the process of post-conflict democratization in other countries suggests not: from the FRELIMO party in Mozambique to the MPLA in

⁴³ Wilder, Andrew *A House Divided? Analysing the 2005 Afghan Elections* Afghanistan Research and Election Unit (Kabul: AREU) December 2005 p.6

⁴⁴ Ruttig, Thomas *Islamists, Leftists, and a Void in the Centre: Afghanistan's Political Parties and Where They Came From 1902-2006* Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Kabul) 2006 pp. 29-30

Angola or UPRONA in Burundi, parties that already existed before the war (or came into being during it) are often strongly represented after the war as result of their institutionalization, proximity to the bureaucratic machinery of the state, or localized bases of power.⁴⁵ It seems that these factors, together with the decision to allow old parties to register, have disadvantaged newer parties in Afghanistan. In addition, it has been observed that in transitional democracies citizens may vote for incumbents not on their merits but according to a rational calculation of the destabilizing consequences of a prospective alternation of power:

It is possible that the electorate exercise the right to choose as much due to its fear of violence and general social instability that would follow from elections as to awarding legitimacy [...] In other words, for the modicum of a peaceful life, voters accommodate themselves to what they regard as illegitimate forms of state authority.⁴⁶

This rationale may be at play in Afghanistan, where pre-Taliban parties maintain a very immediate form of incumbency advantage through their ability to exercise power at the local level. This was particularly true in cases where parties were represented by Northern Alliance members who had won “the war” and dictated the peace in the immediate post-Taliban phase.

Yet the dominance of old parties is also the result of a contingent set of political decisions made at Bonn. New Democratic Parties (NDPs) were prevented from participating at the conference and were instead “reduced to observer status [leading to]

⁴⁵ Netherlands Institute for Multi-party Democracy (NIMD) ‘*Political Party Assistance in Post Conflict Societies*’ 2008 p. 18

⁴⁶ Cowen, M. & Laakso, Lissa ‘Elections and Election Studies’ in Cowen, M. & Laakso, Liisa (eds.) ‘*Multiparty Elections in Africa*’ Palgrave 2002 p. 2

[...] the complete exclusion of pro-democratic forces.”⁴⁷ With only a handful of members amongst the 1,501 delegates at the Emergency Loya Jirga , the NDPs were not able to assert much influence.⁴⁸ This was confirmed when amongst the 50 Karzai appointees for the Constitutional Loya Jirga there was not a single ‘new democrat,’ as Karzai “opted for a coalition with the [...] warlords.”⁴⁹

The elections were similarly a victim of Afghanistan’s weak judicial institutions “as well as the preference to accommodate rather than to confront many candidates with the potential to cause trouble.”⁵⁰ In consequence, through its domination by older parties, the Wolesi Jirga (WJ) suffers from a glaring downfall, having become associated with warlords, drug dealers and human rights violators – many of whom continue as before with impunity.⁵¹

The Wolesi Jirga in Action

Connections between parties and MPs in the WJ have not been formalized as in established democracies.⁵² This has not been aided by the fact that presidential and parliamentary elections were conducted nearly a year apart, creating a backlog of work built up for the inexperienced legislature.⁵³ A parliamentary group system was introduced into parliament with the aim of encouraging identifiable voting blocs, but this has

⁴⁷ Ruttig, Thomas ‘*Islamists, Leftists, and a Void in the Centre: Afghanistan’s Political Parties and Where They Came From 1902-2006*’ Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Kabul) 2006 p. 17

⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 35

⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 37

⁵⁰ Wilder, Andrew ‘*A House Divided? Analysing the 2005 Afghan Elections*’ Afghanistan Research and Election Unit (Kabul: AREU) December 2005 p. 1

⁵¹ International Crisis Group (ICG) ‘*Afghanistan’s New Legislature: Making Democracy Work*’ Asia Report Number 116 – (Kabul/Brussels) 15 May 2006 p. 6

⁵² Larson, Anna ‘*Afghanistan’s New Democratic Parties: A Means to Organize Democratization?*’ Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (Kabul) March 2009 p. 14

⁵³ International Crisis Group (ICG) ‘*Afghanistan’s New Legislature: Making Democracy Work*’ Asia Report Number 116 – (Kabul/Brussels) 15 May 2006 p. 2

stumbled against the primacy of leadership over ideology.⁵⁴ A critical problem is the present voting system in both the *Wolesi* and *Meshrano* Jirgas. Except on sensitive issues, where secret ballot is used, voting is conducted by raising hands or coloured cards. The tally is recorded, but not the names of MPs voting for or against. Hence, constituents have no means to discern their MPs voting patterns, and the MPs in turn have no incentive to vote with their constituents in mind.⁵⁵

It appears there is a self-perpetuating problem here—while the functioning of parliament is highly limited by its lack of political parties, the ways in which it does operate provide no incentive for parties to consolidate their connections to it, or to form in the first place.⁵⁶

Anna Larson notes that while parties conceive of their purpose in terms of gaining political influence in general, few if any frame their purposes in terms of gaining influence in parliament.⁵⁷ Obtaining a seat in parliament, it seems, is not regarded as the best form of access to power. This reflects the short lifespan of the parliament thus far and the continuing salience of informal political action.

Still, the National Assembly is no rubber stamp. For example, the WJ refused to approve Karzai's cabinet nominees as a bloc in April 2006, blocked his final five nominees until August 2006 and has stubbornly retained its opposition to the appointment

⁵⁴ The parliamentary group system is independent of political parties as such, and corresponds roughly to idea of the whip system in some other legislatures. Groups address specific issues or themes and elect a chairperson to lead the group with the aim of proposing policy for ratification in the legislature.

⁵⁵ The WJ also faces steep practical difficulties. For example, budget approval and oversight are key legislative functions, yet “nearly all of Afghanistan’s money [...] comes from donors and is not subject to the National Assembly’s decisions.” Moreover, almost no MPs have a grasp of budgeting and finance: “Currently members are almost entirely reliant on the very ministry of finance officials they are supposed to represent.” See ICG, 2006, pp. 17-18

⁵⁶ Larson, Anna ‘*Afghanistan’s New Democratic Parties: A Means to Organize Democratization?*’ Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (Kabul) March 2009 p. 15

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* p. 17

of Dr. Rangin Dadfar Spanta to the time of writing.⁵⁸ Furthermore, even if the WJ has co-opted criminal and strongmen, the big factional leaders have one vote just like everyone else and voting has been peaceful and largely orderly.⁵⁹ Indeed, WJ debates are instructive, not least for international actors. Moreover, opinions are voiced that are not often heard within the executive and are more representative of citizen views.⁶⁰

Yet in spite of these positive aspects, the NA cannot escape the perverting influence of the dynamics of the electoral system:

The absence of political parties to aggregate interests resulted in parliament and the government *becoming the de facto political parties* [...] This contributed to an extremely adversarial relationship developing between the two with the deputies focusing their energies not on legislating but on attacking the government.⁶¹ (Emphasis added to original).

This dynamic is debilitating, and undermines the government as a whole. The executive risks becoming de-legitimized with the National Assembly increasingly becoming the stronghold of dissent with a kaleidoscope of nationalist, ethnic, tribal and gender-based interests combining (though not allying) to oppose it.⁶²

The New Democratic Parties (NDPs)

Post-Taliban Afghanistan has witnessed the emergence of a new strain of party-politics resting on more plural and democratic principles. These ‘New Democratic Parties’

⁵⁸ Adeney, Katherine ‘*Constitutional Design and the Political Salience of “Community” Identity in Afghanistan: Prospects or the Emergence of Ethnic Conflict in the post-Taliban Era*’ Asian Survey, Vol. 48, Issue 4, pp. 535-557 2008 p. 548

⁵⁹ International Crisis Group (ICG) ‘*Afghanistan’s New Legislature: Making Democracy Work*’ Asia Report Number 116 – (Kabul/Brussels) 15 May 2006 p. 11

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 16

⁶¹ Wilder, Andrew ‘*A House Divided? Analysing the 2005 Afghan Elections*’ Afghanistan Research and Election Unit (Kabul: AREU) December 2005 p. 43

⁶² Tadjbakhsh, S. & Schoiswohl, M. ‘*Playing with Fire: the International Community’s Democratization Experiment in Afghanistan*’ Journal of International Peacekeeping Vol. 15, Issue 2 2008 pp. 256-7

(NDPs) exude “a stated commitment to encouraging democratization; an anti-fundamentalist stance; a preference to justice over amnesty in the judging of war criminals; and a general desire to work with the international community.”⁶³ This new generation of activists has emerged largely from the leftist camp, both ex-PDPA and ex-Maoist, reflecting the fact that the left in Afghanistan is at source a modernizing rather than explicitly communist agenda, easily mapped onto more liberal ideas of democratic state-building. Yet the NDPs also include former *mujahideen* seeking to transcend old political divides. One example is the *Hezb-e Jumhurikhwahan-e Afghanistan*, or ‘Republican Party of Afghanistan’ (RPA) which originated as a sort of anti-Taliban underground with a membership across the ethnic divide, propagating democratic values and human rights. In 1999, in a symbolic act, it declared the UN Human Rights Declaration its programme.⁶⁴

A broader example is the National Democratic Front (NDF). The NDF is comprised of roughly thirteen smaller parties (as of January 2009), all of which seek to cast themselves in the western liberal fashion. The Washington-based National Democratic Institute (NDI) has provided it with assistance. Potential for schism exists, however, in the divide between former-Marxist parties and new parties.⁶⁵ As many as 50 parties have displayed interest in joining and the real and perceived differences among these have led to delicately poised coalition-building, likely to evolve through further fission and fusion. While member parties seem agreed on the basic tenets of democratic

⁶³ Larson, Anna ‘Afghanistan’s New Democratic Parties: A Means to Organize Democratization?’ Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (Kabul: AREU) March 2009 p. 6

⁶⁴ Ruttig, Thomas ‘Islamists, Leftists, and a Void in the Centre: Afghanistan’s Political Parties and Where They Came From 1902-2006’ Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Kabul) 2006 p. 15

⁶⁵ International Crisis Group (ICG) ‘Political Parties in Afghanistan’ Policy Briefing (Kabul/Brussels) 2 June 2005 p. 10

principles and an anti-fundamentalist stance, differences remain over the state's relation to Islam and the economy.⁶⁶ The task of rendering the NDF a more cohesive coalition will be far from straightforward. Sustained consolidation must begin from a full understanding of the differences between individual parties.

While the NDF is the leading example of the New Democratic Parties, it does not maintain a monopoly. With ties to former PDPA and Maoist factions, some parties in the coalition may not be categorized as NDPs, while other NDPs exist outside of the coalition's umbrella.⁶⁷

List of NDF parties (current as of 29 January 2009)

Party Name	Leader
Hezb-i Kar wa Tawsea-I Afghanistan	Omed
Hezb-i Azadi wa Democracy	Kohistani
Hezb-i Afghanistan-I Wahed	Rahimi
Hezb-i Milli Afghanistan	Aryan
Hezb-i Rafa-I Mardum Afghanistan	Gul Wasiq
Hezb-i Democrat-i Afghanistan	Ranjbar
Hezb-I Liberal-i Afghanistan	Ajmal Sohail
Hezb- Azadi Kwahan Afghanistan	Naseri
Hezb-i Tafahum wa Democracy Afghanistan	Ahmad Sahee
Majma-i Milli Falin Solhe Afghanistan	Ainuddin
Hezb-i Taraqi-i Watan	Baktash
Hezb-i Sadat Mardum-i Afghanistan	Peroz
Hezb-i Nuhzat-I Hakimyat-i Mardum Afghani	Sobkhani

Source: Larson, Anna 'Afghanistan's New Democratic Parties: A Means to Organize Democratization?' Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (Kabul: AREU) March 2009 p. 7

Such parties face internal challenges – of capacity and organization – and external threats from more established opposing forces. Indeed, the strength of this new current should

⁶⁶Larson, Anna 'Afghanistan's New Democratic Parties: A Means to Organize Democratization?' Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (Kabul: AREU) March 2009 p. 8

⁶⁷ Ibid. p. 8

not be overstated. While NDPs have won support from a few MPs since the 2005 election, none was able to win a seat in parliament outright. The NDPs lack resources and experience and struggle with the uneven playing field they encounter. Their party identity and programmatic capacities are consequently weak.⁶⁸

Afghan history points to an additional problem: that elites are apt to bend their ostensible ideological stance in order *to win external support* – a crucial currency of power throughout the 20th century and before. It is likely that some NDPs simply reflect the intrinsic ability of certain actors to sense the prevailing wind and adapt their language and programme accordingly. One party leader summed up this opportunism: “I think most political parties were created for fundraising, just like the NGOs.”⁶⁹ Even among well-intentioned NDPs, a more focused outlook will be necessary to future success.

Party platforms within the group of NDPs are vaguely formulated and very similar to each other. Without clear distinctions between party manifestos—at least within the democratic current—it is presumably difficult for party members to become actively involved in promoting them.⁷⁰

This appears to be a recurrent feature of the democratization process in post-conflict situations in the post-Cold War era of liberal interventionism. As one international organization observed in the case of Mozambique’s 2004 post-conflict elections, “[Our] desire to stimulate small political parties has not been very successful, as the parties that

⁶⁸ Netherlands Institute for Multi-party Democracy (NIMD) ‘*Political Party Assistance in Post Conflict Societies*’ 2008 p. 18

⁶⁹ Larson, Anna ‘*Afghanistan’s New Democratic Parties: A Means to Organize Democratization?*’ Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (Kabul: AREU) March 2009 p. 16; party leader (NDF party), interview

⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 18

showed up at the NIMD's office turned out to be of little importance in Mozambican politics and did not manage to convince the Mozambican electorate.”⁷¹

Nevertheless, not all post-Taliban parties are “nothing more than NGOs in political disguise.”⁷² Indeed, it is a central claim of this paper that the NDPs embody one of the very few positive prospects for a political future in Afghanistan that does not return to the violent past. While they have received little external political or technical support thus far, this must change. To become an electoral force, the NDPs will need to overcome at least three problems. First, their well educated elite composition makes them weakly representative of Afghan society, especially in the rural areas. As one Afghan government official noted: “educated people look at candidates’ qualifications [...] in the districts tribe, money and religion are more important.”⁷³ In a country that is 80 per cent rural, no candidate outside of the major urban areas can win an election without attending to the rural vote. Second, the NDPs often rely on the same hierarchical Leninist party structures of old, with little mass participation or internal democracy.

Finally, in the light of the worsening security situation, all new parties are at a disadvantage in campaigning across large swathes of the country – both absolutely and relatively in comparison to older parties with links to armed wings able to influence events at the local level. The following section takes up this and other challenges to party development in more detail.

⁷¹ Netherlands Institute for Multi-party Democracy (NIMD) *‘Political Party Assistance in Post Conflict Societies’* 2008 p. 21

⁷² Ruttig, Thomas *‘Islamists, Leftists, and a Void in the Centre: Afghanistan’s Political Parties and Where They Came From 1902-2006’* Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Kabul) 2006 p. 1

⁷³ Wilder, Andrew *‘A House Divided? Analysing the 2005 Afghan Elections’* Afghanistan Research and Election Unit (Kabul: AREU) December 2005 p. 21

II. The Burden of System and History: Challenges to Party Politics

All political parties in Afghanistan face challenges on at least three levels. First, in terms of the legal, constitutional and administrative framework regulating political parties; second, regarding popular perceptions of political parties informed by a history of war and bloodshed; and finally, regarding the challenge of securing international support and operating in conditions of insecurity.⁷⁴

Legal Framework for Political Parties – the Political Parties Law

Anomalies within the Political Parties Law are blocking the development of political parties, and will constitute the greatest impediment (along with the SNTV system) over the long term. The law prohibits parties “opposed to the principles of the holy religion Islam.”⁷⁵ The vagaries of this statement provide a tool for Islamist parties to block more secular competitors or limit women’s political participation as contrary to *sharia*.⁷⁶ Yet perhaps more decisive over the long term is Article 35 prohibiting parties formed “on the basis of tribalism, parochialism, language, as well as religious sectarianism.”⁷⁷ Again, the vague wording may be used for the spurious rejection of parties seeking to legitimately represent ethnic, sectarian or language-based interests.⁷⁸ This is problematic because although it is to be hoped that political parties will adopt a national outlook, it

⁷⁴International Crisis Group (ICG) ‘*Political Parties in Afghanistan*’ Policy Briefing (Kabul/Brussels) 2 June 2005 p. 4

⁷⁵ Ibid. p. 4; see Political Parties Law, Article 6, paragraph 1

⁷⁶ The possibility of conservative Islamist parties utilizing the constitutional framework was shown by the passing of a new law in March 2009 (later dismissed by President Karzai) that the UN argued legalizes rape within marriage. See Boone, Jon, ‘Worse than the Taliban’ Guardian Online 31 March 2009, retrieved from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/mar/31/hamid-karzai-afghanistan-law> (March 2009)

⁷⁷ Adeney, Katherine ‘*Constitutional Design and the Political Salience of “Community” Identity in Afghanistan: Prospects or the Emergence of Ethnic Conflict in the post-Taliban Era*’ Asian Survey, Vol. 48, Issue 4, pp. 535-557 2008 p. 548

⁷⁸ International Crisis Group (ICG) ‘*Political Parties in Afghanistan*’ Policy Briefing (Kabul/Brussels) 2 June 2005 p. 4

remains unrealistic in the short term to expect parties not to coalesce around more narrow interests.

In multi-ethnic, multi-regional Afghanistan, political bargaining inevitably takes place along regional, ethnic and sectarian lines, and will likely continue to do so even when the democratic transition has been consolidated and mature parties have become vehicles for broader participation.⁷⁹

Registration

The issue of party registration has been key point of contention since the introduction of the Political Parties Law in 2004. The problem has two parts: insufficient capacity on behalf of the registering agency, the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), and conflicts of interest. Through lack of capacity or will, the MoJ registered numerous parties led by former (and current) warlords with links to armed forces and suspected of past human rights abuses in 2004-2005. “During the 2005 candidate nomination process, 557 candidates (out of a total 6,102 WJ and Provincial Council candidates) had challenges filed against their nominations, with 11 disqualified for having links to illegal armed groups.”⁸⁰ Hence, the majority of drug traffickers and strongmen proceeded unhindered. These sort of candidate accounted for “somewhere between 40 per cent to 80 per cent of the newly elected members to the Wolesi Jirga.”⁸¹

⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 7

⁸⁰ Kippen, Grant ‘*Elections in 2009 and 2010: Technical and Contextual Challenges to Building Democracy in Afghanistan*’ Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (Kabul: AREU) November 2008 p. 12; see also, Kolhatkar, S. & Ingalls, J. ‘*Afghanistan’s Parliamentary Elections*’ Foreign Policy in Focus (FPIF) September 2005 – retrieved in April 2009 from <http://www.fpiif.org/fpiftxt/647>. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the initial number of cases filed against candidates exceeded 1000 but that Karzai involved himself personally in the process, watering down the rules and regulation to reduce the original number.

⁸¹ Kippen, Grant ‘*The Long Democratic Transition*’ in Their, Alexander (ed.) ‘*The Future of Afghanistan*’ United States Institute of Peace (USIP) January 2009 p. 12

The MoJ has little or no capacity to verify that criteria have been met, not least because, as one official complained, “we cannot go to the provinces.”⁸² Indeed the MoJ has informally admitted it is powerless to confront the more powerful factions-cum-political parties.⁸³ Ex-*mujahideen* parties (*tanzims*) in particular are afforded impunity. The MoJ does not know if parties are receiving foreign funds through the *hawala* remittance system or if they maintain armed forces outside of Kabul. Overall, registration has been a “confusing and non-transparent process that expose[s] the lack of judicial reform and transitional justice since the Taliban’s fall.”⁸⁴ This lack of institutional capacity to implement registration and eligibility rules favours older parties over new: “On the one hand, [new democratic] parties could not raise sufficient resources from their membership fees, publications or donations [...] On the other hand, however, support by donors [...] was undermined by a political parties law which prohibited parties from accepting financial support from abroad.”⁸⁵ Because actors such as Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and international narcotics traffickers are less likely to abide by this law than Western democracy-promotion agencies, the law prohibiting foreign funding confers an advantage on older, often less desirable, parties.

Secondly, the notion of selecting the Ministry of Justice, a government ministry, for the task of registering parties is flawed because the government, especially in light of Karzai’s attitude to political parties, is not a neutral agency. There is significant conflict

⁸² International Crisis Group (ICG) ‘*Political Parties in Afghanistan*’ Policy Briefing (Kabul/Brussels) 2 June 2005 p. 5 – ICG interview with MoJ official, Kabul, 17 February 2005

⁸³ Larson, Anna ‘*Afghanistan’s New Democratic Parties: A Means to Organize Democratization?*’ Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (Kabul: AREU) March 2009 p. 9

⁸⁴ International Crisis Group (ICG) ‘*Afghanistan’s New Legislature: Making Democracy Work*’ Asia Report Number 116 – (Kabul/Brussels) 15 May 2006 p. 4

⁸⁵ Tadjbakhsh, S. & Schoiswohl, M. ‘*Playing with Fire: the International Community’s Democratization Experiment in Afghanistan*’ Journal of International Peacekeeping Vol. 15, Issue 2 2008 p. 258

of interest. While the law prevents the arbitrary dissolution of a party, “it fails to provide an adequate guarantee of due process against proceedings initiated by the ministry.”⁸⁶ A party’s right to register “should not be dependent on the judgement of individual ministers.”⁸⁷ For example, certain parties, such as the former communist *Hezb-e-Mutahed Milli Afghanistan* (National United Party) or the *Hezb-e Afghanistan Naveen* (New Afghanistan Party) were obstructed from registering by interests within and outside the government exerting pressure on the MoJ.⁸⁸ In one extraordinary case, the *Hezb-e Ashti-ye Melli-ye Afghanistan* (HAMA), or ‘National Reconciliation Party of Afghanistan’ was initially rejected by the MoJ for the stated reason that ‘national reconciliation has already been achieved.’⁸⁹

The responsibility for party registration should rest with a well-resourced independent electoral commission instead of the Ministry of Justice. Senior posts in the commission should be appointed by a committee and not by presidential decree in order to maintain independence. In addition, the commission should have adequate funding and legal prerogative to punish those parties who fail to meet requirements.⁹⁰ This is because the MoJ lacks capacity but also, as stated, because as a government agency it inserts government interests and prejudices directly into the purportedly neutral procedural mechanisms governing elections.

⁸⁶ International Crisis Group (ICG) ‘*Political Parties in Afghanistan*’ Policy Briefing (Kabul/Brussels) 2 June 2005 p. 5

⁸⁷ Larson, Anna ‘*Afghanistan’s New Democratic Parties: A Means to Organize Democratization?*’ Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (Kabul: AREU) March 2009 p. 9

⁸⁸ National Democratic Institute (NDI) ‘*Political Party Assessment: Afghanistan*’ 2006 p. 5; Although both were belatedly accepted, this took as long as a year and a half – in spite of the law’s provision that Ministry must decide “within one month.” See International Crisis Group (ICG) ‘*Political Parties in Afghanistan*’ Policy Briefing (Kabul/Brussels) 2 June 2005 p. 5

⁸⁹ Ruttig, Thomas ‘*Islamists, Leftists, and a Void in the Centre: Afghanistan’s Political Parties and Where They Came From 1902-2006*’ Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Kabul) 2006 pp. 33-4

⁹⁰ Larson, Anna ‘*Afghanistan’s New Democratic Parties: A Means to Organize Democratization?*’ Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (Kabul: AREU) March 2009 p. 4

The Electoral System

Afghanistan reveals one of the apparent paradoxes of democracy-building: that the more straightforward the representation of the people, the less straightforward the politics that can result. The continued support of the Karzai government for Article 20 of the Election Law that provides for the Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) system has been one of the major sources of contention between the government and external actors. Aside from a few somewhat quirky rock-pools (Vanuatu, Jordan etc.), SNTV is not used in democratic systems across the globe for the good reason that it undermines political parties and provides no guarantee that parties' share of parliamentary seats will resemble their vote share, nor that a decent percentage of votes cast are not wasted.

The SNTV system provides for multi-member constituencies (provinces, in the case of Afghanistan)⁹¹ in which no limits are placed on the number of candidates, none of whom require party affiliation. This semi-proportional system is combined with a first past the post method of vote-counting in which electors have only one vote. In practice, therefore, each voter casts one vote for the many seats, allowing the candidates with the most votes to win and rendering the relationship between votes and seats unpredictable. The fact that many candidates from the same party are competing for the same votes creates incentives for internal party fragmentation and encourages clientalistic politics.

Under SNTV, voters cannot assess whether their votes will be wasted because individual candidates are only elected if they reach a certain threshold. In Kabul, for example, the difference in the number of votes received was drastic. The three top candidates won 13.8 per cent, 8.2 per cent, and 8.1 per cent of the votes but the fourth won a mere 2.6 per cent (the victorious candidate, Mohaqqeq, received 52,686, while the

⁹¹ Ibid. p. 10

lowest, Najiba Sharif, recorded just 1,547).⁹² Hence, many of those who opted for the top three ‘wasted’ their votes. This problem also applied to those who voted for losing candidates. According to Andrew Reynolds, 68 per cent of votes countrywide were cast for losing candidates, compared to 5.3 per cent in Iraq’s January 2005 election.⁹³ Strong party organizations could feasibly mitigate this effect by “determining the correct number of candidates to run in order to win seats without overly diluting the vote,” but this coordination is absent in Afghanistan.⁹⁴

This disillusioning system perhaps explains why Kabul experienced a 34 per cent turnout in the parliamentary elections, far below that of the 2004 presidential election,⁹⁵ and the country as a whole witnessed a low overall turnout of 6.4 million voters, compared with 8.1 million in 2004.⁹⁶ In addition, because SNTV creates a weak and divided legislature, the system discourages powerful militias to give up their arms. Regional strongmen are hesitant to take a chance on a single seat in a tenuous parliament. Separately, but related, is the problem that “[when] candidates run as independents and not under party banners, losing becomes much more of a personal loss of face within their respective communities.”⁹⁷

⁹² International Crisis Group (ICG) ‘*Afghanistan’s New Legislature: Making Democracy Work*’ Asia Report Number 116 – (Kabul/Brussels) 15 May 2006 p. 19

⁹³ Reynolds, Andrew ‘*The Curious Case of Afghanistan*’ *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 17 No. 2 April 2006 p. 112

⁹⁴ Adeney, Katherine ‘*Constitutional Design and the Political Salience of “Community” Identity in Afghanistan: Prospects or the Emergence of Ethnic Conflict in the post-Taliban Era*’ *Asian Survey*, Vol. 48, Issue 4, pp. 535-557 2008 p. 548

⁹⁵ International Crisis Group (ICG) ‘*Afghanistan’s New Legislature: Making Democracy Work*’ Asia Report Number 116 – (Kabul/Brussels) 15 May 2006 p. 4

⁹⁶ Kippen, Grant ‘*Elections in 2009 and 2010: Technical and Contextual Challenges to Building Democracy in Afghanistan*’ Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (Kabul: AREU) November 2008 p. 6

⁹⁷ Wilder, A. ‘*A House Divided? Analysing the 2005 Afghan Elections*’ Afghanistan Research and Election Unit (Kabul: AREU) December 2005 p. 35 (quoting Kippen)

Solving SNTV: a Political not a Technical Problem

President Karzai has defended SNTV on the premise that it will protect parliament from malignant parties and factions, that the system is easy to operate and that it is suited to a largely uneducated population. The primary motivation, however, is likely to be Karzai's negative personal view of political parties.⁹⁸ In a BBC interview, Karzai stated that, "Afghanistan was destroyed, tormented, put through lots of suffering because of the [...] political agendas of the parties that were not national. Afghanistan needs a day off that."⁹⁹ Yet Karzai was probably not being entirely candid: the president also wishes to face a fragmented opposition in the legislature rather than strong disciplined political parties. According to one source, "the executive appears to believe the National Assembly is not a separate and equal arm of the state, but rather another ministry to be managed."¹⁰⁰

Less intuitively, Karzai's fondness for SNTV may also stem from recognition of growing citizen disaffection with the government. Reliant on a relatively narrow constituency of Pashtun conservatives, pro-government moderates and members of the smaller minority communities, Karzai's political position is tenuous. If Karzai were to form his own party, there is no guarantee it would win in competition with Pashtun protest parties in his home base of Kandahar. Such a defeat would be politically disastrous.¹⁰¹ It is noteworthy in this regard that there were (two) attempts to set up a presidential party, the first rejected by Karzai for being too 'communist,' the second,

⁹⁸ International Crisis Group (ICG) '*Political Parties in Afghanistan*' Policy Briefing (Kabul/Brussels) 2 June 2005 p. 6

⁹⁹ October 2003; see Ruttig, Thomas '*Islamists, Leftists, and a Void in the Centre: Afghanistan's Political Parties and Where They Came From 1902-2006*' Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Kabul) 2006 p. 40

¹⁰⁰ International Crisis Group (ICG) '*Afghanistan's New Legislature: Making Democracy Work*' Asia Report Number 116 – (Kabul/Brussels) 15 May 2006 p. 15

¹⁰¹ International Crisis Group (ICG) '*Political Parties in Afghanistan*' Policy Briefing (Kabul/Brussels) 2 June 2005 p. 6

comprised of a Panshiri group (called *Nohzat-e Melli*), failed because Karzai decided to drop Mohammed Fahim as running mate for the election.¹⁰² Karzai instead insisted on declaring himself an ‘independent candidate’ for the election.

On this view, recognition of Karzai as *a part of the problem* points to the need for coordinated international pressure for a change to a proportional representation (PR) or list-based system – advocacy that was sorely absent in the initial post-Bonn period.¹⁰³ Such pressure would likely win domestic backing because Karzai’s actions have consistently been attacked not just by external actors, but by Afghans politicians themselves. For example, in January 2005, 34 parties demanded an amendment of the Electoral Law “in order to conduct the elections on the basis of a Proportional Representation system.”¹⁰⁴

Perhaps ironically in view of his motives, Karzai’s visceral dislike of political parties has undermined his personal power. Without large blocs that straddle government and parliament, shape policy and pass bills, the executive is vulnerable to paralysis. Meanwhile, “in the fragmented parliament of individuals it was difficult for the government to discern friend from foe.”¹⁰⁵ International pressure might therefore aim to persuade Karzai that acceptance of political parties could end his political isolation and build him stable political support.

¹⁰² Ruttig, Thomas ‘*Islamists, Leftists, and a Void in the Centre: Afghanistan’s Political Parties and Where They Came From 1902-2006*’ Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Kabul) 2006 p. 41

¹⁰³ See International Crisis Group (ICG) ‘*Political Parties in Afghanistan*’ Policy Briefing (Kabul/Brussels) 2 June 2005 p.6

¹⁰⁴ Ruttig, Thomas ‘*Islamists, Leftists, and a Void in the Centre: Afghanistan’s Political Parties and Where They Came From 1902-2006*’ Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Kabul) 2006 p. 42

¹⁰⁵ Wilder, A. ‘*A House Divided? Analysing the 2005 Afghan Elections*’ Afghanistan Research and Election Unit (Kabul: AREU) December 2005 p. 44

Public Perceptions of Political Parties

Afghanistan has been enveloped by war for decades and political parties are often blamed for their role in the conflict. Words such as *hizb* (party) and *harakat* (movement) are associated imaginatively with the historical and lived experience of life under communist and Islamist parties or factions. A generational gap appears to exist, however, in which younger people are more willing to view parties as a stabilizing force.¹⁰⁶

A barrier to transcending this generally poor image afflicting all parties, but especially new parties, is their excessive secrecy. Whether because of the poor public perception of parties, the lack of security or the wider political culture, Afghanistan's political parties have opted for a culture of ambiguity in which information is withheld. This culture fits uneasily with notions of party function in established democracies, where parties publicly acknowledge their parliamentary representation.¹⁰⁷

Organizational Strength and Financial/ Technical Resources

Internal organization within Afghan parties is largely top-down and lacking in a coherent strategy to link the party to its members. Indeed, in no Afghan party does the rank and file have even nominal influence on party direction. Most parties rely on the whim of one or two personalities and few can lay claim to a discernable policy platform or guiding ideology.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶International Crisis Group (ICG) '*Political Parties in Afghanistan*' Policy Briefing (Kabul/Brussels) 2 June 2005 p. 12

¹⁰⁷ Larson, Anna '*Afghanistan's New Democratic Parties: A Means to Organize Democratization?*' Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (Kabul: AREU) March 2009 p. 12

¹⁰⁸ National Democratic Institute (NDI), '*Political Party Assessment: Afghanistan*' 2006 p. 17

One factor contributing to these weaknesses is the difficulty of securing party funding. Parties with solid financing often rely on illicit sources of funding, while those parties operating on a more transparent basis have few financial resources and no reliable method of raising them. This is partly because, in contrast to other democracies, including in developing states, Afghanistan has no significant middle or business class that could provide a membership and funding base. And in Afghan politics, money matters: parties must print posters and campaign materials, fund campaign offices and candidate agents, entertain potential voters, pay for transportation (and buy votes). Meanwhile, “wealth is not only important in terms of paying for campaign-related expenses, but also for giving the impression that a candidate is [...] more likely to assist voters.”¹⁰⁹

Standing for Office, Ducking for Cover: Democracy and Fear

The abiding problem for Afghan democracy is the pervasive violence that renders the term ‘post-conflict’ premature. Afghanistan’s 2010 and 2011 elections will be, in the east and in the south at least, conducted in conditions of acute insecurity. This environment will crush the imaginative purchase of democracy, which in the first instance lies in the idea that voters may freely choose their representatives. In Afghanistan, voters are more likely to elect those they consider most likely to protect them, based on facts about power in the local context, regardless of their views on the legitimacy of the candidates in question. At the practical level, deteriorating security will affect different parties differently: *ex-Mujahideen* parties invariably have sufficient strength and power to

¹⁰⁹ Wilder, A. ‘A House Divided? Analysing the 2005 Afghan Elections’ Afghanistan Research and Election Unit (Kabul: AREU) December 2005 p. 28

continue their activities regardless; New Democratic Parties (NDPs), by contrast, require a relatively stable atmosphere to prosper.¹¹⁰

V. Afghanistan's Party Politics in the Face of the Future

This section explores the future of political parties in Afghanistan specifically in relation to the two social cleavages – religion and ethnicity – that bear most heavily on Afghan politics.

Filling the Moderate Void? The Promise and Limits of the 'New Democrats'

Not since the poet and advisor to the King, Khalilullah Khalili, failed in the mid-1960s to set up the *Hezb-e ittehad-e Melli* ('National Unity Party') has the possibility of a moderate non-leftist and non-Islamist pro-status quo party look likely.¹¹¹ Politics has been divided between Islamists and leftists, with ethno-national impulses cutting across both.

The real demarcation runs between the new democrats, the post-PDPA left and most of the ethno-nationalists on the one hand, and the Islamists on the other, on their intransigently divergent positions on the relation between government and religion, i.e. Islam.¹¹²

While other divides do matter – such as the split between parties that did and did not participate in the resistance against the Soviet-backed PDPA regime, or those who favour federalist or unitary conceptions of the state – it is the role of religion and the state that

¹¹⁰ Larson, Anna 'Afghanistan's New Democratic Parties: A Means to Organize Democratization?' Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (Kabul) March 2009 p. 13

¹¹¹ Ruttig, Thomas 'Islamists, Leftists, and a Void in the Centre: Afghanistan's Political Parties and Where They Came From 1902-2006' Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Kabul) 2006 p. 39

¹¹² Ibid. p. 44

features most prominently. In the future, the ability of the Afghan state to keep this dispute within the confines of the political process will be critical. This will require strong political parties and, in particular, moderate parties able to bridge old divides.

In this regard, Afghanistan started off badly in the post-Taliban era. Thomas Ruttig argues that in 2001 there was the possibility of a monarchist party, the *Tehrik-e Wahdat Melli-ye Afghanistan*, or ‘National Unity Movement of Afghanistan (NUMA),’ emerging and consolidating. This could have gained an “extraordinarily broad base and – together with the new democrats – filled the void between old leftists and the Islamist right.”¹¹³ But the party was drowned out at the Emergency Loya Jirga, where the King was forced to renounce any political ambitions. This moderate force was the victim, in part, of Washington’s desire to install into the government its proxy in the execution of Operation Enduring Freedom, the Northern Alliance (*Shura-i-Nazar*), comprising largely of Tajiks from the Panjshir valley.¹¹⁴

In this way, a pro-reform party willing to back the executive never came into being – a failing that was sustained later by the hostility of Karzai towards parties in general. A ‘party in office’ is sorely missing.¹¹⁵ If political parties are not strengthened to meet these shortfalls, the prospects for containing religious cleavages within the political realm are remote.

¹¹³ Ibid. p. 39

¹¹⁴ See Starr, S. ‘Sovereignty and Legitimacy in Afghan Nation Building’ in Fukuyama, F. *Nation-Building: Beyond Afghanistan and Iraq* Johns Hopkins University Press 2006 pp. 107-125; see also, Riphenburg, Carol J. ‘Electoral Systems in a Divided Society: the Case of Afghanistan’ *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, April 2007 p. 11

¹¹⁵ Ruttig, Thomas *Islamists, Leftists, and a Void in the Centre: Afghanistan’s Political Parties and Where They Came From 1902-2006* Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Kabul) 2006 p. 44

The Question of Ethnicity

A second cleavage that must be contained within the political framework if the Afghan state is to survive beyond the presence of international forces is ethnicity. The question of how to manage ethnicity formed one of the major debates in the constitution making process: should “ethnicity” be recognized by the institutions of the state or will this exacerbate rather solve tensions?¹¹⁶ In the event, the 2004 Constitution rejected formal ethnic representation in state institutions. The Constitution, therefore, provides “no defence against perceived or actual domination of the state by any one particular ethnic community. This could lead to increased ethnic resentment and conflicts.”¹¹⁷

While most of Afghanistan’s monarchs have been (Sunni) Pashtun, as were several communist leaders and most of the Taliban, it is noteworthy that there was no very obvious dominant ethnic element among the Islamists or the Communists in the pre-Taliban period. Although ethnicity was instrumentalized during the Soviet invasion and after, it was never the leading cleavage around which groups made, to use the language of Carl Schmitt, ‘friend-enemy’ distinctions. This is perhaps because the largest community, the Pashtuns, do not comprise a majority but, by most estimates, a plurality of the population (at 42 per cent); while religious cleavages make for more inclusive rallying calls: 99 per cent of the population is Muslim, 80 per cent of which is Sunni.¹¹⁸ It is one of the ironies of post-Taliban Afghanistan that the de-stabilizing consequences of ethnic tension are more likely under the new democratic dispensation than previously. As

¹¹⁶ Adeney, Katherine ‘*Constitutional Design and the Political Salience of “Community” Identity in Afghanistan: Prospects or the Emergence of Ethnic Conflict in the post-Taliban Era*’ Asian Survey, Vol. 48, Issue 4, pp. 535-557 2008 p. 539

¹¹⁷ Ibid. p. 535

¹¹⁸ Ibid. p. 538; in fact, it is often not so simple: community cleavages may actually be coterminous—“for example, the Hazaras are primarily Shia—while others are cross cutting—for example, Pashtuns are divided along tribal and regional lines.” P. 538

Katherine Adeney observes, “Although other issues [...] appear to be more prominent in Afghanistan’s political agenda at present, serious ethnic tensions could easily reassert themselves.”¹¹⁹

This is partly because the Afghan state is such a high stakes game. “Afghanistan is [...] not only a unitary system but also *de jure* is very highly centralized. While it may not be *de facto* centralization – after all, Kabul’s writ does not extend throughout the country—any perception of an ethnically dominated centre [...] will inevitably lead to major disaffection.”¹²⁰ It is also because in practice there is nothing *a priori* about democratic institutions that encourages conflict resolution: democracies are competitive in character and may have destabilizing effects in the absence of well-developed institutional capacity to manage such instabilities.¹²¹ This is particularly salient in Afghanistan, where the minimal function of democracy – elections – is under threat. Security levels are lowest in the predominantly Pashtun provinces in the south and east. Failing to hold elections throughout the whole country could “exacerbate existing ethnic tensions between Pashtun and non-Pashtun Afghans”¹²²

The absence of an operative institutional framework to manage ethnicity is manifest in the prohibition of parties representing ethnic interests. Article 35 of the Constitution prohibits parties formed ‘on the basis of tribalism, parochialism, language, as well as religious sectarianism,’ thus “ensuring that a formal grand coalition of ethnic

¹¹⁹ Ibid. p. 537

¹²⁰ Ibid. 544

¹²¹ Tadjbakhsh, S. & Schoiswohl, M. ‘*Playing with Fire: the International Community’s Democratization Experiment in Afghanistan*’ *Journal of International Peacekeeping* Vol. 15, Issue 2 2008 p. 263

¹²² Kippen, Grant ‘*Elections in 2009 and 2010: Technical and Contextual Challenges to Building Democracy in Afghanistan*’ Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (Kabul) November 2008 p. 17

parties was impossible.”¹²³ The frustration caused by this ban is revealed by the fact that minority ethnic groups, who have most to fear from Pashtun domination, are the most well-organized and anti-government in parliament. As can be seen in the following table, no Uzbek parliamentarians support the government, while 95 per cent oppose it. Hazaras are also opposed: fewer than 20 per cent support the government while 68 per cent percent oppose it.¹²⁴ Tajiks and Pashtuns, meanwhile, are broadly split between support and opposition to the Karzai regime.

Parliamentary Alignment by Major Ethnic Group

Ethnic Group	Government		Opposition		Non-Aligned	
	Seats	%	Seats	%	Seats	%
Pashtun	47	39.8	16	13.6	55	44.6
Tajik/Aimaq	21	39.6	16	30.2	16	30.2
Hazara/Shia	8	19.5	28	68.3	5	12.2
Uzbek	0	0	19	95	1	5
Others	5	29.4	5	29.4	7	41.2
Total	81	32.5	84	33.7	84	33.7

Source: Wilder, Andrew ‘*A House Divided?*’ *Analyzing the 2005 Afghan Election*’ (Kabul: AREU, December 2005) p.9

Ethnic Breakdown of Wolesi Jirga with Political Party Affiliation

Ethnic group	Total Seats	Party Affiliated (%)
Pashtun	118	49
Tajik/Aimaq	53	70
Hazara/Shia	41	80
Uzbek	20	100

¹²³ Adeney, Katherine ‘*Constitutional Design and the Political Salience of “Community” Identity in Afghanistan: Prospects or the Emergence of Ethnic Conflict in the post-Taliban Era*’ Asian Survey, Vol. 48, Issue 4, pp. 535-557 2008 p. 548

¹²⁴ Ibid. p. 550

Source: Wilder, Andrew 'A House Divided?' *Analyzing the 2005 Afghan Election* (Kabul: AREU, December 2005) p. 10

From 2001-5, ethnic tensions were largely fuelled by perceived Tajik dominance, signified by the Tajik Panshiri 'trio' from the Northern Alliance that initially dominated the Karzai government: General Mohammed Fahim (defense minister, head of the army and later a vice president), Dr. Abdullah Abdullah (foreign minister), and Yunus Qanooni (interior minister and later special presidential adviser for internal security and education minister). But as the above table indicates, while early ethnic disaffection was born from the command of the state from 2001-2005 by the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance, from 2005 onwards fear of eventual Pashtun domination began to attract political heat. For political parties that informally represent smaller ethnic groups (Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras and others), the Pashtun identity of Hamid Karzai and the weakening grip on the state by Tajiks since 2001 raise fears of ethnic dominance. For example, the National Congress Party of Afghanistan (led by the Tajik secular intellectual Latif Pedram) and the National Islamic Movement (led by the Uzbek Abdul Rashid Dostum), have revived talk of federalism as the sole answer in the negotiations with the Taliban.¹²⁵ In this way, early identification of the state with a narrow Tajik minority created a more general alarm about how the question of ethnicity would be played out through the state apparatus that has evolved into a pervasive fear among minorities about systemic marginalization from the political centre.

It is possible that ethnic grievances are currently being held in check by Younis Qanooni's position as leader of the house and informal leader of the 'opposition.' As an

¹²⁵ Tadjbakhsh, S. & Schoiswohl, M. 'Playing with Fire: the International Community's Democratization Experiment in Afghanistan' *Journal of International Peacekeeping* Vol. 15, Issue 2 2008 p. 262

ethnic Tajik, Qanooni's presence goes some way to levelling ethnic power in the state.¹²⁶ But in the absence of institutional structures to deal with the issue, this perceived balance of ethnic forces within the government remains highly contingent.

An example of how flammable the issue of ethnicity may become is the opposition group, the United National Front, formed in 2007. The coalition is pursuing “increased power for parliament and... direct elections for provincial governors,”¹²⁷ a prime ministerial system government (in an obvious challenge to Karzai) and a more proportional electoral system. The group includes “leading members of Karzai's own cabinet—including the Tajik Ismail Khan, the Uzbek Rashid Dostum, and Karzai's own vice president, the Tajik Ahmad Zia Masood.”¹²⁸ The ethnic element is clear: the coalition is dominated by Tajik and Uzbek former Northern Alliance members. “This mostly non-Pashtun conglomerate may fear the continued rule of Pashtuns...through [the] presidential system, as Pashtuns would always outnumber them.”¹²⁹

The question of Pashtun dominance is indeed delicate, not least because if it fails to obtain, Pashtuns are likely to feel alienated:

When questioned about the 2004 elections, Pashtuns in the south almost universally seemed to feel that if they were fair and democratic, they would break the perceived domination of Panjshiris in the central government. Few appeared willing to accept an election victory by an ethnically Tajik party.¹³⁰

¹²⁶ International Crisis Group (ICG) *'Afghanistan's New Legislature: Making Democracy Work'* Asia Report Number 116 – (Kabul/Brussels) 15 May 2006 p. 11

¹²⁷ Adeney, Katherine *'Constitutional Design and the Political Salience of "Community" Identity in Afghanistan: Prospects or the Emergence of Ethnic Conflict in the post-Taliban Era'* Asian Survey, Vol. 48, Issue 4, pp. 535-557 2008

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid. p. 555-6; Adeney is quoting a report from the Islamabad-based Institute for Policy Studies

¹³⁰ *'Political Parties in Afghanistan'* Policy Briefing (Kabul/Brussels) 2 June 2005 p. 11

In addition, opportunities for Pashtuns to mobilize around ethnic or non-ethnic non-militarized parties are inhibited by the deteriorating security conditions, which prevent parties from campaigning. To summarize, it will prove supremely difficult to persuade both Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns that no one group is marginalized from access to state power.

Ethnicity and the State: a Party-Political Solution?

It would be misguided to hope that ethnic politics can lose its political heat simply by withholding political recognition to ethnic identities. This is “a dangerous game to play, especially if the informal mechanisms of cooptation currently helping to maintain ethnic harmony break down.”¹³¹ What solutions are possible? Federalism is unlikely and probably undesirable, and the balkanization of Afghanistan is almost certainly impossible. In fact, notwithstanding internal conflict and external threat, the territorial parameters of the Afghan state are well established and no domestic secessionist movements have historically come close to threatening them.¹³² This is a cause for cautious optimism, as is the fact that Afghan provinces (which are also its electoral units) are not all homogenous along ethnic lines. In addition, “the fact that no one ethnic group controls more than 50 per cent of the seats [in parliament] will help serve as a check against blatant attempts to promote narrow ethnic agendas.”¹³³ Yet an ethnic backlash remains possible and would undermine the sense of nationhood required to secure broad consent to state authority.

¹³¹ Adeney, Katherine ‘*Constitutional Design and the Political Salience of “Community” Identity in Afghanistan: Prospects or the Emergence of Ethnic Conflict in the post-Taliban Era*’ Asian Survey, Vol. 48, Issue 4, pp. 535-557 2008 p. 555

¹³² See Ali, Tariq ‘*Mirage of the Good War*’ New Left Review March-April 2008

¹³³ Wilder, A. ‘*A House Divided? Analysing the 2005 Afghan Elections*’ Afghanistan Research and Election Unit (Kabul: AREU) December 2005 p. 8

Ethnic politics will not go away. It will “likely remain one of the main organizing factors but would be better brought out into the open within formalized blocs.”¹³⁴ In the long term national-level parties may become multi-ethnic but in the long run we are all dead – or rather, the calculus for political life in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of international forces has already been decided. One solution would be to allow or even to provide for ethnic representation by political parties. As one Wolesi Jirga member argues: “We are against ethnic agendas if they claim superiority but not if they legitimately aid the national interest.”¹³⁵ It may be less dangerous to bring ethnic divisions into the open than to suppress them. Indeed, it is important to recognize that failing to recognize group identities in the Afghan constitution was not a neutral but rather a political decision: taken to extend both Karzai’s power and the highly individualized nature of Afghan politics.

It is impossible to divorce the question of representation from the electoral system because all electoral systems have inherent biases: the choice of system depends on what one wants to achieve.¹³⁶

It could be that reserved seats, drawing on the broadly successful Indian experience of reservations for minority group identities, are a viable mechanism for settling the problem of ethnicity within the state. This solution would at least take cognizance of the fact that the Afghan government must seek to manage not eliminate ethnic differences. This argument rests on the assumption, often ignored, that “individuals are capable of possessing multiple loyalties and identifications, not all of which are in opposition to one

¹³⁴ ICH, 2006, p. i

¹³⁵ International Crisis Group (ICG) ‘*Afghanistan’s New Legislature: Making Democracy Work*’ Asia Report Number 116 – (Kabul/Brussels) 15 May 2006 p. 12

¹³⁶ Adeney, Katherine ‘*Constitutional Design and the Political Salience of “Community” Identity in Afghanistan: Prospects or the Emergence of Ethnic Conflict in the post-Taliban Era*’ Asian Survey, Vol. 48, Issue 4, pp. 535-557 2008 p. 546

another.”¹³⁷ Such a solution is very unlikely to be realized in Afghanistan’s current political climate. What remains certain, however, is that we cannot think about questions pertaining to multi-partyism without considering how these questions aid or undermine the need to settle ethnic tensions through the state.

Conclusion

The present lacuna of mature and well-functioning political parties in Afghanistan is perhaps the greatest challenge to securing an enduring form of democratic politics over the long term. On this view, the overriding problem is that political party development rests on such a wide host of other factors. For Barnett Rubin, the predicament is that “until Afghanistan has a functioning, legal economy and basic institutions, there’s nothing really for a parliament to do.”¹³⁸ Nevertheless, the importance of party development must not be lost amidst the welter of pressing security and development concerns. If Afghanistan fails to consolidate an effective means of representation, starting with functioning political parties, the prospects for rendering the state’s authority legitimate in the eyes of a solid majority of Afghans remain slim.

While some have argued, drawing on Aristotle’s pessimism about democracy in countries without a strong middle class, that the establishment of effective multi-partyism in Afghanistan is impossible, the leading claim of this paper is that such cynicism is unfounded and merely feeds into President Karzai’s destructive vision of democracy.

¹³⁷ Ibid. p. 553; Adeney posits that “A middle ground for Afghanistan could be to institute quotas to ensure a basic level of community representation, supplementing these quota seats with others to be allocated according to merit. This is extremely unlikely to happen because the dangers of ‘entrenching’ ethnicity are perceived to be too great.” See p. 554-555

¹³⁸ Kolhatkar, S. & Ingalls, J. ‘*Afghanistan’s Parliamentary Elections*’ Foreign Policy in Focus (FPiF) September 2005

After all, Afghanistan's regional neighbour, India, has maintained a flourishing democracy for over half a century (excepting three years of emergency rule in the 1970s) – the consolidation of which was secured long before the emergence of anything resembling an emancipated middle class. It will indeed be difficult to engender meaningful political representation in a country where the state dominates class and civil society as a vehicle for political interests and power, but with external assistance and pressure the problem is not insurmountable.

This paper has highlighted a host of specific obstacles to the realization of such a meaningful and sustainable party politics. The most decisive barrier remains the general mistrust of political parties, from President Karzai down to the general population. Such disillusionment rests on a false reading by Afghans of their recent historical experience with political parties: although parties and movements bear some responsibility for Afghanistan's violent past, parties were not the *cause* of the country's turmoil. Rather, the long winter of civil conflict was caused by the intransigence of various elites, none of whom accepted the legitimacy of opposing views. The absence of a viable party politics during previous eras greatly contributed to this vortex, and every effort must therefore be made to overturn this longstanding absence of a peaceful culture of plurality and opposition. As this paper has shown, the idea that a non-party participatory form of democracy (the imaginative justification for the SNTV system) can escape and transcend the disappointments of party-political representation is an illusion.

Practical Political Possibility: Between Means and Ideals

Even in the best case scenario, Afghanistan's political parties will not resemble those in established democracies for some time. Yet securing an organized party framework is critical if parties are to begin to represent the interests of their constituents in ways that convince Afghan citizens that political parties may benefit them. Given the Karzai government's distrust of political parties, the reforms suggested in this paper *are unlikely to succeed without a unified and coordinated effort by international actors*. Such unity will only come from a full recognition of the importance of political party development.

This emphasis on the necessity of external action on political party development must be tempered by the realization that the international community cannot hope to foster an orderly, liberal, or Duvergerian model: indeed, any attempt to create a model conforming to the Western ideal of multi-partyism is likely to undermine the end it purports to serve. The best we can hope for is an especially acute realization of Schumpeter's model of democracy as an elite game – little more than a competitive struggle, bound by constitutional rules, between politicians and their political parties for the people's vote.¹³⁹ Such a dynamic is inevitably disappointing but remains far better than the heavily mystified, unstable, and corrupted oligarchy that President Karzai's non-party vision of democracy implies. At the very least, party politics creates incentives for representatives to engage with their constituents and win their confidence.

Thus, while the New Democratic Parties are to be encouraged, the GoA and the international community must avoid repeating Najibullah's mistake when, in January

¹³⁹ See, Schumpeter, J. A. Joseph 'Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy' (London: Routledge, 1994)

1987, he allowed a controlled political opening as part of his *siasat-e ashti-ye melli* (national reconciliation policy). Najibullah passed a Law on Political Parties in July 1988 allowing party registration, but in reality the regime permitted only left-wing parties and token Islamic representation.¹⁴⁰ This lack of expression quickly fed into violent opposition to the state. In contemporary Afghan politics, we must avoid the temptation to prohibit Islamist or ethno-nationalist parties, even if this implies a messy form of politics, jarring to certain liberal views.¹⁴¹

The next major test of political party representation will come in the 2010 parliamentary election. “These next elections face the major challenge of re-instilling public confidence in a mysterious process that failed to produce the changes promised during the initial phase of the last electoral cycle.”¹⁴² The following section of recommendations sets out an operative path forward in meeting that challenge.

¹⁴⁰ Ruttig, pp. 13-14

¹⁴¹ Whether or not this premise should extend to include the more extreme groups is an open question. The current wisdom is very much against their inclusion. For example, groups affiliated with the Taliban have tried to enter the party-political fold, only to be refused.

¹⁴² Kippen, Grant ‘Elections in 2009 and 2010: Technical and Contextual Challenges to Building Democracy in Afghanistan’ Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (Kabul: AREU) November 2008 p. 5

Recommendations

After the broadly successful completion of the first round of presidential and parliamentary elections in 2004 and 2005, the GoA and the international community have lapsed in their attention to party-political development, focusing instead upon the more technical development of democratic and electoral systems.¹⁴³ The following recommendations offer a framework for redressing this deficit.

To Political Parties

Afghanistan's parties, and in particular the New Democratic Parties (NDPs) that have arisen after 2001 and retain few links with the violent past, must strive to expand their membership and capacity and provide a clearer projection of their identity and mission. The NDPs must be encouraged to find common interests and form coalitions in order to compete with the more conservative older parties. Important themes include a community-based approach in which parties build closer ties to their constituents, a focus on internal elections and building internal structures, and the maintenance and expansion of membership lists.¹⁴⁴

Given that the SNTV system will likely remain in place for the 2010 parliamentary elections, parties must strategize on how best to transcend the system's flaws. For example, parties should choose one candidate in each geographical area.¹⁴⁵ Parties should also increase their public activities by, for instance, encouraging voter registration and organizing their own civic awareness activities.

¹⁴³ Larson, Anna 'Afghanistan's New Democratic Parties: A Means to Organize Democratization?' Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (Kabul: AREU) March 2009 p. 2

¹⁴⁴ National Democratic Institute (NDI) 'Political Party Assessment: Afghanistan' 2006 p. 18

¹⁴⁵ Larson, Anna 'Afghanistan's New Democratic Parties: A Means to Organize Democratization?' Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (Kabul: AREU) March 2009 p. 3

To the GoA

The government should:

- (i) Remove certain restrictions on registering and shift the registering agency from the MoJ to a neutral agency (see pages 18-20).
- (ii) Support political parties by providing government funds for legitimate political party activities, so as to reduce the scope for corruption and level the playing field.¹⁴⁶ The state should commit to funding parties according to an agreed set of incentives based on membership numbers (providing these can be verified) or vote share. The allocation of such incentives must be enacted by an independent commission.¹⁴⁷
- (iii) Engage in a country-wide political party education programme.
- (iv) Apply greater coercive pressure during the registration process to proscribe parties with links to armed factions.¹⁴⁸

In addition, once new parliamentary candidate registration protocols have been agreed, these would benefit from a countrywide public awareness campaign.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ National Democratic Institute (NDI) *'Political Parties in Afghanistan'* Policy Briefing (Kabul/Brussels) 2 June 2005 p. 1

¹⁴⁷ Larson, Anna *'Afghanistan's New Democratic Parties: A Means to Organize Democratization?'* Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (Kabul: AREU) March 2009 p. 4

¹⁴⁸ As one report suggested: "The lack of violent reaction from those who were excluded [during the 2005 elections] suggested that the electoral authorities could have shown more backbone and used the screening process to greater effect in advancing the disbandment of armed groups." See International Crisis Group (ICG) *'Afghanistan's New Legislature: Making Democracy Work'* Asia Report Number 116 – (Kabul/Brussels) 15 May 2006 p. 4

¹⁴⁹ Kippen, Grant *'Elections in 2009 and 2010: Technical and Contextual Challenges to Building Democracy in Afghanistan'* Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (Kabul) November 2008 p. 4

To the International Community

After the 2005 elections, international funding for political-party development faded as donor attention shifted to working with the legislatures in the Wolesi and Meshrano Jirgas and provincial councils.¹⁵⁰ The international community must focus on political party development and pressure the GoA to do the same. In particular, the international community must support the process rather being tempted to back certain individual personalities.

One potential problem is that responsibility for the elections in 2009/10 will shift from international agencies such as the Joint Electoral Management Body (JEMB) to Afghan institutions – primarily the Independent Election Commission. Early signs are not propitious. For example, “the fact that the chairman is a presidential appointment – and certain statements he has made”¹⁵¹ – have compromised his independence. According to one Afghan Provincial Council member, “the international community needs to lead on the vetting process because people have no confidence in Afghan institutions.”¹⁵²

External actors should:

- (i) Select a single agency, preferably the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA), to lead political party development initiatives and ensure that other international actors channel support through that agency rather than separately. Instead of ad hoc assistance, the international

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 42

¹⁵¹ Ibid. p. 9

¹⁵² Quoted in Kippen, Grant ‘Elections in 2009 and 2010: Technical and Contextual Challenges to Building Democracy in Afghanistan’ Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (Kabul: AREU) November 2008 p. 12

community must commit to multiyear funding for political-party development and civic education programs

- (ii) Recognize political parties by inviting them to conferences and discussions on social issues.¹⁵³ International support could also entail an officially mandated and multilateral parties' support network or coordination group.¹⁵⁴
- (iii) Promote dialogue and bridge the gap between civil society – including NGOs, religious organizations and the media – and political parties.
- (iv) Put pressure on the government to drop the SNTV system. This must be done urgently because under the constitution electoral law cannot be altered for a year before the polls. One face-saving strategy to be recommended to the GoA would be to argue that SNTV is unconstitutional, citing the Political Parties Law which states in Article 12 that “A registered party shall enjoy the following rights [...] Introducing candidates at all elections” as well as Article 47: “the Independent Election Commission must compile and exhibit a list of the eligible registered political parties and independent candidates including final lists of candidates for each of those parties.”¹⁵⁵
- (v) The international community should raise the standing of the legislature. For example, delegations of visiting parliamentarians should visit their Afghan

¹⁵³ Larson, Anna ‘*Afghanistan’s New Democratic Parties: A Means to Organize Democratization?*’ Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (Kabul: AREU) March 2009 p. 4

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 22

¹⁵⁵ Ruttig, Thomas ‘Islamists, Leftists, and a Void in the Centre: Afghanistan’s Political Parties and Where They Came From 1902-2006’ Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Kabul) 2006 p. 42

counterparts.¹⁵⁶ Donors should also create formal linkages between Afghan parties and political parties within donor countries.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ International Crisis Group (ICG) *'Afghanistan's New Legislature: Making Democracy Work'* Asia Report Number 116 – (Kabul/Brussels) 15 May 2006 p. 23

¹⁵⁷ Kippen, Grant *'The Long Democratic Transition'* in Their, Alexander (ed.) *'The Future of Afghanistan'* United States Institute of Peace (USIP) January 2009 p. 43

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