

Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit  
Synthesis Paper Series

# DECONSTRUCTING “DEMOCRACY” IN AFGHANISTAN



Anna Larson

May 2011





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## Acronyms

ANSF	Afghan National Security Forces
FDG	focus group discussion
IEC	Independent Election Commission
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
NGO	nongovernmental organisation
NSP	National Solidarity Programme
PC	provincial council
PDPA	People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan

## Glossary

<i>azadi</i>	freedom
<i>charchaokat-i-Islam</i>	literally, “the four fixed edges of Islam,” used to signify the concept of an “Islamic framework”
<i>jirga</i>	council of community elders, normally convened on an ad-hoc basis to deal with specific problems
<i>Loya Jirga</i>	“Grand Council”; a national-level meeting of elders. Historically, these have been called by national leaders as a means to validate their authority or acquire a stamp of approval for new policies
<i>Meshrano Jirga</i>	“House of Elders”; Afghanistan’s upper house of parliament, consisting of presidential appointees and selected provincial council members
<i>Perakh Bansat</i>	completely representative/inclusive government
<i>shura</i>	community council
<i>Wolesi Jirga</i>	“House of the People”; Afghanistan’s lower house of parliament, consisting of elected MPs



## Executive Summary

In 2011, the words “democracy” and “Afghanistan” do not sit well together. For many Afghans, the country’s 10-year process of democratisation has proven bitterly disappointing in its failure to deliver justice, equity or services, while the term itself has become increasingly associated with the unwanted imposition of Western values. This is matched by a sense of fatigue and resignation among members of the donor community, who have promoted the rhetoric of democratisation and paid for expensive election cycles, yet have seemingly little to show to their increasingly war-weary and impatient publics.

Despite this, this paper argues that there is still space for the development of a democratic politics in Afghanistan. It claims that democratisation is a process, without an end-point—and a process that is constantly shifting between poles of “more” or “less democratic.” In this respect, democratisation in Afghanistan (as elsewhere) has the potential to move in either direction. It also asserts, however, that if the process of democratisation is to take lasting root in the country, it needs to be situated firmly within Afghan priorities, many of which may not necessarily overlap with the principles enshrined in liberal democracy. In reaching these conclusions, the paper brings together two years of research on Afghan perspectives of democracy and democratisation in rural and urban areas across six different provinces. While it makes no claim to represent all Afghan perspectives on the subject, it highlights three key themes in the data which have important implications for the future of the country’s democratisation process:

- **Afghan ownership versus foreign imposition:** People’s general hostility to the term “democracy” as a symbol of Western domination was matched by a widespread acceptance of elections and the institution of parliament as a way to make government more inclusive and accountable. In contrast to immoral, unfettered “freedom” that was

seen to prevail in liberal democracies, many called for the implementation of democracy within an “Islamic framework.” However, the precise nature of what this might encompass was rarely defined and seems to some extent open to negotiation.

- **Dynamics of security and stability:** Democratic participation is currently a distant second priority to being able to go about everyday activities without fear of harassment or violence for respondents in less secure areas. Such immediate concerns were also set against a more widespread wariness of the threat political competition might pose to the long-term stability of the country. Political parties were seen as particularly dangerous in this respect, and many people favoured a “politics of consensus” as the most legitimate, peaceful form of decision-making.
- **Issues of equality:** The question of equal representation was the subject of conflicting and often contradictory opinions—people’s views on how constituents are represented and by whom varied widely, especially across the rural-urban divide. However, there was an almost universal desire for equality in terms of access to decision-making, service provision and resources. Consequently, many saw Afghanistan’s current version of “democracy” as little more than a way for the powerful to consolidate their positions.

Many of these priorities and principles would be difficult to implement even in a secure environment, and the paper does not present policy recommendations or answers to the questions they raise. However, by grounding its analysis in the perspectives of ordinary citizens, it hopes to expand the debate on democratisation beyond the priorities and assumptions of decision-makers in Kabul, and to focus on what Afghans themselves want and expect from their political system.



# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction to the study and rationale

Common understandings of the term “democracy” within current political and development thought often assign it an inherently positive quality. The word often symbolises the freedom of peoples to choose leadership for themselves, in a context where each person’s vote is of equal value, and in which there is always the possibility of change at the highest levels. “Democracy” also frequently encapsulates fundamental principles of human rights, justice, economic development and security. The belief in these values has prompted popular uprisings worldwide, along with the widespread propagation of top-down democratisation initiatives from across the political spectrum.

On the face of it, it may therefore seem surprising that—according to AREU research—many Afghans do not share this perspective or definition. However, the term has a chequered history in Afghanistan. For many, it is seen as an imported concept laden with contemporary associations of Western liberal values and secularism; for others it also carries earlier associations with the communist People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in the 1980s. Rather than bringing about peace and rule of law in the ten years since the overthrow of the Taliban, the new structures of governance that have been installed in the name of “democracy” have been used by powerholders in and outside the government in what might be considered highly “undemocratic” ways. These structures have come to be associated with increasing insecurity, a predatory government unable or unwilling to deliver services to its citizens, and unlimited freedom promoting a free-for-all, corrupt and immoral social order.

This study began in January 2009 as a means of exploring Afghan perceptions of democracy and democratisation. Concerned by the many overarching assumptions made by international

actors regarding the merits of various activities included under the label of “democracy promotion” in Afghanistan, it set out to clarify and document views of “democracy” expressed by Afghans across the country. This had not been done in a systematic manner at that point, and represented a significant gap in the literature.

In its treatment of “democracy,” this paper attempts to focus on perceptions—both those of Afghans and of international actors in the country—of the word and its meaning. In doing so, it seeks not only to critically assess different understandings of the word “democracy” in the Afghan context but also to question conventional Western assertions (as described above) of what it is or should be. This is primarily due to the way findings from this research have demonstrated a considerable spectrum of different definitions and associations, highlighting the diversity of meaning the word can contain. It is, however, difficult if not impossible to discuss “democracy” at length without considering some of the more prevalent interpretations of the term in the literature, as will be discussed below. In their most basic form, these interpretations view democracy as a political system in which citizens within a given state, institution or entity have the right to determine how they are governed and who should have the authority to make decisions. As will be discussed later, the paper upholds the perspective put forward by political scientist Charles Tilly in his description of democratisation as a continuum along which states can become more or less democratic. In this understanding, levels of “democraticness” are always prone to change and do not achieve an end-point of “true democracy” that can be defined by any one current or past example.<sup>1</sup>

The findings from this research clearly show that democracy as both a word and concept as applied to post-2001 governance in Afghanistan

<sup>1</sup> Charles Tilly, *Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 13-14.

are perceived with a great deal of ambiguity and uncertainty by many of its citizens, and that its positive qualities are far from universally recognised. For many, there is a great concern that it espouses an imperial project that dictates a secular worldview and presents a challenge to people's identity as both Afghans and Muslims. This perspective is fundamentally important to the future of the country's democratic institutions, such as elections and a representative parliament, which, by contrast, are welcomed at least in principle by the majority of those interviewed. If the trajectory of democratisation is to last in Afghanistan, let alone contribute to political stability, it is critical to acknowledge and actively counterbalance the negative implications it holds for many Afghans.

If the trajectory of democratisation is to last in Afghanistan, let alone contribute to political stability, it is critical to acknowledge and actively counterbalance the negative implications it holds for many Afghans.

## 1.2 Understandings of democracy and democratisation in the literature

There is a vast literature available on the subject of democracy and democratisation, much of it describing the varying types of democracy implemented across different countries, or setting out potential new models. These variants include liberal or Jeffersonian democracy, social democracy, deliberative democracy and many others, each offering an additional set of characteristics on top of a commitment to the rule of the people, by the people, for the people.

However, as pointed out by political analyst Fareed Zakaria, there is a general tendency to use the word democracy as synonymous with "liberal democracy"—a political system which emphasises certain liberal constitutional values such as rule or law, property rights, separation of religion and state, human rights, and economic liberalism, for example.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, states are judged according to these additional criteria, and not just on how they choose their leaders.<sup>3</sup> Evidently, some of these liberal values, such as rule of law, represent characteristics which are universally applicable and

2 Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1997, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/53577/fareed-zakaria/the-rise-of-illiberal-democracy> (accessed 25 April 2011).

3 Zakaria, "Illiberal Democracy."

conducive to growth and development. However, this is not the case with all of them. Separation of religion and state, for example, may be appropriate and desirable in a secular society where people of different faiths co-exist; but identifying this as a determinant of "democraticness" would exclude the possibility of democracy taking root in countries where religion and statehood coincide. By the same token, promoting a liberalised economy might lead to economic growth, but it is not a prerequisite for the establishment of a democratic government in the most basic definition of the term. As such, while liberal democracy may be the most common form of democratic system in place in the twenty-first century—and the most highly valued by international institutions—there is, according to Zakaria, a need for a distinction between its liberal and its fundamentally democratic characteristics.

Another point of distinction concerns the nature of democratic participation. "Rule by the people" in and of itself does not specify exactly how the people should necessarily participate in ruling. While modern or liberal democratic institutions are for the most part centred around elections and majority rule, these are the combined result of a Greek legacy and a relatively new Western democratic culture, rather than the central tenets of democratic governance. As John Keane highlights, the institutions of "assembly democracy"—community councils not dissimilar to the *shuras*, *jirgas* and *ulema* councils of contemporary Afghanistan and elsewhere—existed in ancient Syria-Mesopotamia (among other places) long before the Greeks were participating in elections, and functioned according to comparable consultative principles.<sup>4</sup> Similar institutions were adopted by early Muslims

4 John Keane, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2009), 111.

in decision-making practices, as “mechanisms for publically monitoring and sharing power among peoples who considered each other as equals.”<sup>5</sup> Consultation would become a key tenet of government in early Islamic society, along with institutions of self-government that arguably influenced the development of later institutions in the West.<sup>6</sup> While representative government—along with a systematic mechanism for electing and replacing representatives—would only come with the advent of European democracies in the 17th and 18th centuries, consultative assemblies within early Muslim communities embodied the way in which the taking of power by force was considered un-Islamic.<sup>7</sup> It is thus significant that the origins of certain modern democratic institutions were consolidated around consultation and consensus, two prominent features of the way politics is conducted in Afghanistan.

A third factor for discussion around recent literature on democracy and democratisation is their trajectory over time in different contexts. There is a commonly held assumption that “democracy” is a fixed end-state—a challenging but ultimately permanent achievement. This perception has been examined in some detail by Tilly, who claims instead that democratisation occurs along a continuum and can move in both directions—that is, that it can be equally possible for countries to de-democratise as democratise.<sup>8</sup> According to Tilly,

*Democratisation means net movement toward broader, more equal, more protected and more binding consultation [between the state and its citizens]. De-democratisation...then means net movement toward narrower, more unequal, less protected and less binding consultation.<sup>9</sup>*

For Tilly, these four characteristics of democratisation—breadth (political inclusion),

5 Keane, *Life and Death*, 128.

6 Keane, *Life and Death*, 154.

7 Keane, *Life and Death*, 144.

8 Tilly, *Democracy*.

9 Tilly, *Democracy*, 14.

equality between citizens, protection (“against the state’s arbitrary action”<sup>10</sup>) and mutually binding consultation—are the key tenets against which the democraticness of states can be measured.<sup>11</sup> Evidently, there are factors or “processes” which facilitate movement in either direction, but it is possible for a state to be more or less democratic depending on its policies toward governing its citizens at any given time.

Essentially, Tilly’s key message is that democracy is contingent on the behaviour of states toward their citizens and is not static: “democratisation and de-democratisation occur continuously, with no guarantee of an end point in either direction.”<sup>12</sup> Applying this somewhat state-centric philosophy to the Afghan case is perhaps problematic in a country where relations between state and local communities have been notoriously complex over the last century; while communities have needed the state to perform various functions, they have maintained a shifting and continually re-negotiated distance from state interference.<sup>13</sup> This relationship is fundamentally different to the fixed, predictable and uncompromising roles of state and citizen found in Western European societies, for example. Nevertheless, Tilly’s perspective on what democracy should constitute is interesting in its encapsulation of the need for accountability and protection of citizens—two priorities that emerge in the data from Afghan respondents. His process-oriented (as opposed to events-focused) approach can be set in stark relief against international discourses of “democratisation” in Afghanistan, which have essentially comprised little more than the holding of elections.

### 1.3 Islam, democracy and the state

This paper does not intend to provide an academic argument on the compatibility or otherwise of Islam

10 Tilly, *Democracy*, 15.

11 Tilly, *Democracy*, 14-15.

12 Tilly, *Democracy*, 24.

13 Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 1994), 148.



and democracy, since this has been done at length and by learned scholars elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, given the prevalence in the data of reference by respondents to “Islamic democracy,” it is necessary to provide a brief overview of key theoretical arguments that have been made on the subject before comparing these with the statements in the data. This section considers also the role of the state as it relates to Islam and democracy.

### *Theoretical considerations*

Some commentators, such as Samuel Huntington, have implied that a state cannot be Islamic and democratic simultaneously. In 1993, Huntington argued that while there are elements of Islamic doctrine that both facilitate and act as a barrier to democracy, there had never been an example of a fully functioning democratic and Islamic state:

*[i]n practice...the only Islamic country that has sustained a fully democratic system for any length of time is Turkey, where Mustafa Kemal Ataturk explicitly rejected Islamic concepts of society and politics and vigorously attempted to create a secular, modern, Western, nation-state.*<sup>15</sup>

Assuming for the time being, however, that Tilly’s four criteria of breadth, equality, protection and mutually binding consultation are an appropriate way to gauge of the level of democratisation in a given state, this perspective begins to appear simplistic; in theory, none of these measures precludes a state being either conjoined with a national religion or specifically Islamic.

14 This is a very brief introduction to some of the issues surrounding Islam and democracy that have been referred to by researchers and respondents during this project. It is not intended as a comprehensive overview. For more information and analysis, see for example A. Soroush, Mahmoud In Sadri and Ahmad Sadri (eds.), *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam: The Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Islam and the Challenge of Democracy* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004); Mohammad Khatami, *Islam, Liberty and Development* (Binghamton, NY: Institute of Global Cultural Studies, Binghamton University, 1998); and John L. Esposito and John O. Voll, *Islam and Democracy* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

15 Samuel P. Huntington, “Democracy’s Third Wave” in L. Diamond and M.F. Plattner (eds.), *The Global Resurgence of Democracy* (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore and London, 1993), 19.

Before briefly considering the arguments surrounding Islam and democracy, the idea of an Islamic state should be discussed and differentiated. As highlighted above, the very concept of “the state” is problematic in Afghanistan; it could be argued that “the state” as developed historically in Western Europe does not and has never existed in a country where relationships between various communities and the state being determined by “externality and compromise,”<sup>16</sup> rather than a consistent or reliable contract (as embodied in Tilly’s mutually binding consultation). This in itself is another debate—and since it is clear that “democratisation” in Afghanistan since 2001 has been very much a part of “state-building” agendas, the two concepts will be considered together here.

Olivier Roy makes a useful distinction between neo-fundamentalists, such as the Taliban—who have little interest in working through the institution of the state—and Islamists, whose political agendas are or can be intertwined with state policy. According to Roy,

*“Islamism” is the brand of modern political Islamic fundamentalism which claims to recreate a true Islamic society, not simply by imposing the shariat, but by establishing first an Islamic state through political action. Islamists see Islam not as a mere religion, but as a political ideology which should be integrated into all aspects of society (politics, law, economy, social justice, foreign policy, etc.)...Contrary to the Islamists, [the neofundamentalists] do not have an economic or social agenda. They are the heirs to the conservative Sunni tradition of fundamentalism, obsessed by the danger of a loss of purity within Islam through the influence of other religions. They stress the implementation of shariat as the sole criterion for an Islamic State and society.*<sup>17</sup>

Since the neo-fundamentalists described here are simply not concerned with the state—the current focus of democratisation—in any way, shape or form, it is thus possible to remove such groups from the

16 Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, 148.

17 Olivier Roy, “Neo-Fundamentalism,” Social Science Research Council, <http://www.ssrc.org/sept11/essays/roy.htm> (accessed 21 April 2011).

discussion for the time being.<sup>18</sup> Islamists, by contrast, have adopted the state as a vehicle through which to promote an all-pervasive application of Islam through social policy and planning, for example in Iran. This has not happened in Afghanistan, however, where Islam has been used by different groups in the country as a political tool—for example in the resistance against foreign intervention during the Soviet occupation, or, in the case of the Taliban, to drive a narrow fundamentalist agenda that ignored the broader functions of state—but has not been incorporated systematically into social policy or central planning.

To date, Islamist parties in Afghanistan (such as Jamiat-i-Islami, Hizb-i-Islami and Dawat-i-Islami) have not managed to embrace the nation-state model or demonstrate clear policy goals that would see the incorporation of Islam through social and public development. However, this is more likely due to their lack of opportunity and organisational capacity, or past preference for guerrilla resistance based on traditional social networks as opposed to military engagement with the state,<sup>19</sup> than because they are fundamentally disinterested in the influencing of state policy. A possible exception could be Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s illicit, militant branch of Hizb-i-Islami. However, even its registered, legal branch has actively sought positions in government bodies (not only those considered influential) and has taken a clear stance promoting education and development.<sup>20</sup> In spite of these moves toward a more modernist acceptance of or engagement with the state, it is nevertheless clear in Roy’s analysis more generally that Islamist parties are not democratic.

This statement does not rule out the theoretical compatibility of Islam and democracy, however. Returning to Tilly’s framework, the central concern with breadth is essentially about inclusion and citizenship. In its ideal manifestation, all adult individuals in a state have the same status as citizens and enjoy the same rights. This is linked to the second of his criteria—equality—which in its

18 Roy, “Neo-Fundamentalism.”

19 Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, 148.

20 Author’s conversations (2011) with party members.

most positive extreme determines that ethnicity or other distinctions have no bearing on the political rights or duties of citizens.<sup>21</sup> This coincides with the Islamic principle of *Tawhid* (the unity of God), which determines that while God is sovereign over all people, all under God are equal. John Esposito and John Voll take this a step further in stating that “*Tawhid* provides the conceptual and theological foundation for an active emphasis on equality within the political system.”<sup>22</sup> The third and fourth categories—protection from arbitrary state action and mutually binding consultation—appear to run parallel to Islamic concepts of *Ijma* (consensus), *Shurah* (consultation) and *Ijtihad* (independent interpretive judgement) in their emphasis on accountability.<sup>23</sup>

The issue of God’s sovereignty (as opposed, for example, to the sovereignty of “the people”) has been raised by a number of prominent scholars, such as Khaled Abou El Fadl, who argues that there is clear theoretical overlap between Islam and democracy. In emphasising the religious grounds for human agency, El Fadl explores the space for human decision-making within Islamic society:

*[C]laims about God’s sovereignty assume that the divine legislative will seek to regulate all human interactions, that Shari’ah is a complete moral code that prescribes for every eventuality. But perhaps God does not seek to regulate all human affairs, and instead leaves human beings considerable latitude in regulating their own affairs as long as they observe certain standards of moral conduct, including the preservation and promotion of human dignity and well-being... God’s sovereignty provides no escape from the burdens of human agency.*<sup>24</sup>

If humans are provided with the God-given intellect and responsibility to take on “regulating

21 Tilly, *Democracy*, 14.

22 Esposito and Voll, *Islam and Democracy*, 25.

23 Esposito and Voll, *Islam and Democracy*, 25.

24 Khaled Abou El Fadl, “Islam and the Challenge of Democracy,” in Khaled Adou El Fadl with Jerney Waldron, John L. Esposito, Noah Feldman et al, *Islam and the Challenge of Democracy* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), 9.

their own affairs,” a space seems to exist for the combined notions of divine sovereignty and decisions made according to the will of the people. In theory at least, there are grounds to make the case for compatibility between Tilly’s definition of democratic processes and the core principles of an Islamic political system.

### *Islam and democracy in the data*

These theoretical discussions are important to acknowledge in that they have the potential to inform further discussion about the possibilities for democracy in Afghanistan. They demonstrate the intellectual space that exists for such debate, and purposefully separate the connections between Islam and democracy from those between Islam and the state; both may be fruitful distinctions for further application to the Afghan context.

Fundamentally, however, these kinds of discussions were not widely acknowledged by respondents for this study, who instead talked about the relationship between Islam and democracy in practical terms based on their own experiences

and perceptions. Many respondents put into stark relief the differences between “Islamic democracy” and “Western democracy,” which will be discussed in some depth below. When these views were examined further, what became very clear was that the difference lay not in the political systems, nor processes of leadership selection or accountability, but rather in social practices and values considered specific to a given culture. Respondents perceived a critical difference to exist between many essential values of Western and Islamic societies. These included attitudes toward modesty, women’s behaviour, marriage and family practices (including the cultural practice of sons staying at home after marriage to look after aging parents), and the acceptance of conversion to another religion. These were summarised with the tenet that the Qur’an should be the source of guidance on all aspects of moral behaviour. While respondents rarely distinguished between those features that were inherently Islamic and those which were specific to the Afghan context, it was nevertheless clear that differences centred around social norms and values. This will be discussed in more detail below.



## 2. Democratisation Efforts in Afghanistan

Modern democratic institutions—and more specifically, bodies of elected representatives and the polls held to select them—were not established in Afghanistan for the first time post-2001. Indeed, there is a considerable history of attempts to “modernise” politics according to democratic principles: a parliament was established in the late 1920s under Amanullah Khan, sets of consecutive elections for parliamentary seats took place in the 1960s, and elections of a kind were held under the Soviet-backed People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan in the 1980s.<sup>25</sup> The successive parliaments of 1965-1969 and 1969-1971 functioned in a very similar manner to the way in which the current parliament operates, as the Constitution of Afghanistan formed during the post-Taliban Bonn Process was built around the 1964 Constitution of Zahir Shah’s “era of democracy.” As such, it is wholly incorrect to assume that the so-called Bonn Process took place against a blank slate, and many of the institutions that have emerged during the formation of post-Taliban Afghanistan are in fact continuations or developments of much earlier versions.

A new rhetoric of democratisation was promoted to underpin the state-building initiatives driven by international actors after the 2001 military invasion. These initiatives involved the establishment of a transitional and then interim government headed by Hamid Karzai, followed by the country’s first presidential elections in 2004. Coordinated by the Joint Elections Management Body (JEMB) and largely an internationally-run exercise, these elections were hailed as a great success at the time, with a turnout of almost 80 percent across the country.<sup>26</sup> While the official declaration of a free and fair election was not

25 For a full listing of elections in Afghanistan and the history of democratic institutions see Anna Larson, “Toward an Afghan Democracy” (Kabul: AREU, 2009), 5-8.

26 Joint Electoral Management Body, “Final Report: National Assembly and Provincial Council Elections 2005,” <http://www.jemb.org/pdf/JEMBS%20MGT%20Final%20Report%202005-12-12.pdf> (accessed 17 June 2006).

entirely consistent with the perceptions of many Afghans, who were first-hand witnesses to the fraud that occurred,<sup>27</sup> the achievement was nevertheless impressive. Parliamentary and provincial council (PC) elections followed in 2005, once again with a relatively high turnout. The inauguration of parliament in November 2005 marked the conclusion of the four-year Bonn Process, which from the outset was specified to be “a first step toward the establishment of a broad-based, gender-sensitive, multi-ethnic and fully representative government.”<sup>28</sup>

Since this time, the *Wolesi Jirga* (lower house of parliament) has completed a first full term and a new parliament has recently been inaugurated. These events have been accompanied by a plethora of short-term, donor-funded programmes. Often implemented before or after an election, these have attempted to provide technical assistance to promoting various aspects of a “democratisation” agenda encouraging the strengthening of civil society, the promotion of women’s rights and gender equality, the consolidation of political parties and attempting to establish mechanisms of subnational governance. However, these have remained largely superficial engagements, and have been undermined in many ways by international actors’ preference for dealing with the executive over and above elected bodies.<sup>29</sup> In one respect, their character emphasises how the international community’s stated commitment to promoting democratisation was not accompanied by

27 Various interviews, comparative experiences of elections.

28 “Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions” (Bonn Agreement), <http://unama.unmissions.org/Portals/UNAMA/Documents/Bonn-agreement.pdf> (accessed 21 April 2011).

29 Interestingly, having promoted a highly centralised system in Bonn, international perspectives appear to be shifting. For example, Charles L Barry and Samuel R Greene of the US Department of Defense-affiliated National Defense University seem to put forward the case for decentralisation as a way forward for international democratisation programmes. See Charles L. Barry and Samuel R Greene, “What Democracy for Afghanistan? An Analysis Utilizing Established Norms and five Non-Western Cases” (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 2009), vi.

adherence to the principles of accountability they had talked about during elections. However, they also demonstrate some of the key assumptions on which democratisation efforts (or more specifically, the holding of elections) have been based, which are outlined in detail below.

## 2.1 Underlying assumptions of Afghanistan's democratisation process

The assumption that democratisation breeds stability is indicative of international approaches to post-conflict contexts and represents a recognised doctrine of intervention.<sup>30</sup> Other examples of this approach in practice include the Balkans and East Timor, where elections have been instigated by an external mission such as the United Nations soon after the end of civil conflict as a means to bring about power-sharing agreements largely considered legitimate by the populace. In theory, this narrative of inclusion is entirely laudable, promoting at least the semblance of equal access to resources and power. In practice, however, this is not always experienced by the population on the ground. As pointed out above, the installation of new democratic institutions in a post-conflict setting rarely occurs on a blank slate and there are always existing powerholders with vested interests (and considerable skill) in moulding the system to their own advantage. As the Bonn Process took place, it became increasingly evident that it was being used by members of the largely non-Pashtun Northern Alliance to re-establish their power bases—an opportunity made easier with the exclusion of Taliban representation and with the moral high ground that fighting the Taliban and appearing on the winning side bought them in the eyes of the

30 See JEMB, “Final Report: Elections 2005,” which states as its introductory sentence, “The achievement of the presidential election on 9 October 2004 and the appointment of a new cabinet brought new momentum to the Afghan peace process.” For a broader example, see United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Human Development Report 2002: Deepening Democracy in a Fragmented World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1. For a critical analysis of this assumption, especially in the case of identity-based conflicts, see Sunil Bastian and Robin Luckham (eds), *Can Democracy be Designed? The Politics of Institutional Choice in Conflict-torn Societies* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2003), 37-51.

international community.<sup>31</sup> Notably absent at Bonn were large-scale organised Pashtun groups; Tajiks and other northern-based minorities had fought in a much more organised and coordinated manner than their Pashtun counterparts who were still fractured across tribal and other dividing lines. Even nine years on, with large-scale Pashtun representation in the cabinet, a narrative of Pashtun exclusion nevertheless remains as a result of the perceived favouritism toward other groups at Bonn.

While the ideals of power-sharing through democratic means were thus admirable in their intent, in Afghanistan they served to rubber stamp resource capture by pre-existing powerholders who were able to use the language of post-Taliban “liberation” and democracy to their distinct advantage. This is not to say that the Bonn Process should not have happened, nor that the establishment of democratic institutions in the aftermath of conflict is not a worthy goal. However, it should be acknowledged that the assumption in narratives of democratisation that all players will be re-established on a new, level playing field through elections is a dangerous one. This is especially true in post conflict contexts, where civil conflict over land and resources, for example, can leave deep-seated social inequalities made more concrete by the justice vacuum that inevitably occurs during war.

The second assumption on which democratisation assistance often rests is that the transition to a democratic state will generate economic growth and development. As one commentator has written, “liberal democracy has come to be seen by the mainstream development community as central for economic, political and social development over the past decade.”<sup>32</sup> This perspective has been put

31 This is not to say that it would have been possible to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table at this time. As has been noted by one commentator, the group were portrayed by then US President George Bush as enemies to international security, having hosted Al Qaida protected Osama Bin Laden. Including them in peace talks would thus likely have been unthinkable (author’s conversation with Martine Van Bijlert of Afghan Analysts Network).

32 Lisa Horner, “How and Why Has Multiparty Democracy Spread Over the Last 100 Years, and What Difference Has it Made to the Lives of the Poor?” (Oxford: Oxfam International, 2008). <http://www.oxfam.org>.

forward by several international organisations, such as the United Nations<sup>33</sup> and (indirectly) the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) through the promotion of “good governance.” The argument is that introducing democratic institutions will encourage a culture of accountability in governance and that this in turn will result in governments being pressured to deliver needed goods and services to their citizens, at the risk of being voted out of office if they fail to do so. Furthermore, as succinctly stated by former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, democracy is seen to promote creative citizenship: “In fact, democracy is a prerequisite to economic growth, which only flourishes when minds are encouraged to produce, invent, and explore.”<sup>34</sup>

However, this cause-and-effect reasoning has been contested by some academics in the field who argue that this was not how Western democracies achieved development.<sup>35</sup> One of their arguments is that economic growth and the expansion of civil society are needed before any successful transitions to democracy can take place. In his explanation of the process of democratic consolidation in Britain, John Garrard emphasises the levels of economic and social development which had been achieved prior to the introduction of universal suffrage and what would be contemporarily classed as liberal democracy:

*Widespread membership of...civil organisations substantially pre-dated political inclusion for the groups concerned, was rising rapidly at the time of inclusion, and continued doing so for many years after...Britain was fortunate in having a capitalist market economy in place before democratisation began. Continued commercial expansion during democratisation generated sufficiently benign economic cycles*

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uk/resources/downloads/FP2P/FP2P\_Democracy\_Bldg\_Pol\_Voice\_%20BP\_ENGLISH.pdf (accessed 11 August 2008).

33 UNDP, *Human Development Report 2002*, chapters 2 and 3.

34 Madeleine Albright, “We Must Keep Freedom Alive,” <http://www.parade.com/news/2009/11/08-madeleine-albright-freedom-alive.html> (accessed 21 April 2011).

35 Ha-Jun Chang, *Kicking Away the Ladder: Development Strategy in Historical Perspective* (London: Anthem, 2002).

*while democratisation was underway to ensure that it was never associated with economic failure...[T]here are problems in trying to create liberal democracy alongside capitalist take-off in situations where other economies have long since undergone this process and are present to set often-impossible standards of expectation.*<sup>36</sup>

This latter point is particularly relevant to newly democratic contexts in which economic growth has been minimal for many years. This paper does not suggest that functioning capital market economies in particular are necessary pre-requisites for democracy. However, the simple assumption that the promotion of democracy automatically promotes growth (and that this growth will trickle down immediately to those who need it) does not hold true during the process of democratisation in resource-poor states—even if democratic institutions in their ideal state do encourage the transparency, accountability and trust needed to ensure a more equal distribution of resources. This assumption is especially problematic if it raises citizens’ expectations of rapid improvements in goods and service delivery to unrealistic levels. If not met—for example in the case that structures are not in place to ensure the trickle-down of any growth that does occur—these can lead people to associate “democracy” with economic decline and broken governmental promises. In Afghanistan, such high expectations have gone largely unmet over the past nine years, and there is a very real sense among Afghans that democracy has contributed to a more unequal distribution of wealth.

The third assumption—that democracy is wholeheartedly desired by the Afghan populace—will be discussed throughout the remainder of this paper on the basis of qualitative research into perceptions of democracy and democratisation in Afghanistan. Democratisation has become global best practice for international state-building interventions, and yet in Afghanistan, democracy now carries negative connotations for many people. For some Afghans the term is linked to the Soviet

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36 John Garrard, “Democratisation: Historical Lessons from the British Case,” *History and Policy*, [www.historyandpolicy.org/papers/policy-paper-21.html](http://www.historyandpolicy.org/papers/policy-paper-21.html) (accessed 21 April 2011).

narratives of secularism and communist economic policy as implemented under the PDPA in the 1980s; in the post-2001 era, many suspect “democracy” of being an externally-imposed imperialist project, a view fuelled by fundamentalist groups which denounce it as anti-Islamic propaganda. This is not to say that many in Afghanistan do not recognise the potential benefits that a political system based on democratic politics could bring; there is widespread support for elections, for example, and for a potentially inclusive decision-making body such as the *Wolesi Jirga*—if it were to be truly inclusive. But the weak structures of democratisation that have been put in place since the Bonn Process began have not served to inspire Afghan confidence in the system’s potential ability to challenge corrupt, violent and entrenched powerholders who now seem richer and more influential than ever before.

## 2.2 Today’s Afghanistan: A world away from 2001

Issues of democratisation in Afghanistan also need to be considered in the current context—much has changed in ten years and there are now a different set of factors at play. Security has decreased significantly over this time and there are an increasing number of areas under insurgent control. For many Afghans, administrative corruption has also reached new heights in recent years, contributing

to a dramatic turnaround in general perceptions of the Karzai government—now bitterly resented by many.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, the continued context of insecurity in which there is neither outright war nor consolidated peace has created substantial opportunities for the enrichment of powerful elites. The lack of concern paid to how donor funds are actually spent while attention is diverted to stabilisation efforts has allowed certain key public figures to accumulate vast wealth, a fact not lost on the rest of the population.<sup>38</sup> These three factors raise serious doubts about the capability, legitimacy and political will of institutions ostensibly designed to promote the furthering of a democratic agenda in the country. In doing so, they thus threaten the sustainability of the democratisation process as a whole.

Another dynamic currently at play within the Afghan context is the growing possibility of negotiations and talks with the Taliban in the context of the broader exit strategy for international forces. These have been contributing directly to discussions on democratisation in Afghanistan, in the talks about “red lines”—the bare minimum requirements of the international community in terms of the functioning of the state if and when the Taliban are included; in discussions about women’s rights and how they might be affected by these negotiations; and in the possibility of power-sharing in any eventual settlement, which could directly contradict methods of selecting government by democratic means.<sup>39</sup>

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37 Karen Hussmann, Manija Gardizi and Yama Torabi, “Corrupting the State or State-Crafted Corruption? Exploring the Nexus Between Corruption and Sub-National Governance” (Kabul: AREU, 2010).

38 Andrew Wilder and Stewart Gordon, “Money Can’t Buy America Love,” *Foreign Policy*, 1 December 2009 [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/12/01/money\\_cant\\_buy\\_america\\_love](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/12/01/money_cant_buy_america_love) (accessed 21 April, 2011).

39 Stephen Biddle, Fotini Chrostia and J. Alexander Thier, “Defining Success in Afghanistan: What can the US accept?” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2010, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/66450/stephen-biddle-fotini-chrostia-and-j-alexander-thier/defining-success-in-afghanistan> (accessed 21 April 2011).



## 3. Methodology and Provincial Contexts

### 3.1 Methodology

#### *Structure*

This research was conducted in two phases—the first between January and July of 2009, and the second during the same period in 2010. The second phase was added as a means to extend the scope of the research, in terms of both geographical area and the changing social political context over the course of 18 months. The two-phase approach allowed comparisons to be made pre- and post-2009 elections, particularly significant in terms of assessing the impact of fraudulent and widely publicised presidential and PC polls on perceptions of democratic representation.

The approach also allowed comparisons to be made between preparations for two sets of different national elections—the presidential and PC elections in August 2009, and the parliamentary elections in September 2010. Collecting data in two consecutive electoral years meant that respondents were more likely to be familiar with the country’s institutions of democratic representation due to their visible presence in the form of campaigns and advertisements for candidates and elections in most areas. In this context, a lack of familiarity with such institutions could also serve to determine people’s level of isolation from activities at the political centre in Kabul.

Finally, the structure allowed for improvements and amendments to the methodology used in the first phase, such as fixing gaps in the interview guide, which will be discussed in more detail below. Initial dissemination workshops were conducted in between the two phases in order to gather feedback from stakeholders and key informants about the findings from the first phase. Their comments were then taken into account and used to improve the methodology used in the second phase.

#### *Sampling: Phase one*

First phase data was collected in rural and urban areas of Kabul, Balkh and Parwan Provinces. These provinces were initially selected due to their relative security, which allowed for easy access by the research team. Kabul and Balkh were also chosen for their key urban centres, with Parwan as a rural contrast (albeit one closely connected to centres of political and economic power due to its proximity to Kabul and position on a major north-south trade route). Members of the research team were familiar with these provinces having conducted previous research in these locations, and hence were able to draw from a broader range of existing knowledge. In each province, interviews were conducted in one urban and one rural district location to ensure a mixed data set.

A total of 36 individual qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted in the first phase, along with 33 focus group discussions (FGDs) of 3-15 respondents each. A sample of men and women of different ethnicities and social backgrounds was used. Respondents interviewed included teachers, students, religious scholars, civil society representatives, traders, community leaders and political party members. The majority of interviews were conducted with respondents who had at least primary education if not more. Few respondents were illiterate, and thus a significant part of the Afghan population was not represented in the first phase. While the sampling design specified that an equal number of literate and illiterate respondents should be targeted, the research team was often referred by the government officials giving permission for the study to those they considered most able to answer questions.

#### *Sampling: Phase two*

The second phase was designed to compensate for the limitations in the sampling from the first phase. Accordingly, three further provinces with very different characteristics were selected:

Nangarhar, Ghazni and Nimroz. These provinces were purposefully selected for the contrast that their ethnic populations (Pashtun and Baluch) would provide against the majority Tajik areas in the first phase, and also for the added variable of insecurity. Nimroz was selected in particular for its remoteness from the centre, providing a direct comparison with those provinces near to Kabul or with their own large cities or trade routes.

A total of 120 interviews were conducted in the second phase—40 in each province, comprised primarily of individual interviews. More interviews were needed in the second phase to collect not only perspectives on democracy, but to get a sense of the specific context in which the interviews were taking place. In a further measure designed to increase understanding of the contexts as well as mitigating security risks, partner organisations were contracted to collect data in these areas using research staff native to each province.<sup>40</sup> This allowed for valuable mid-project and final debriefing sessions in which the data gathered in interviews was checked against the knowledge of the research staff themselves. In each province, interviews were conducted in one urban and one rural (or “semi-urban” where security restricted travel to fully rural areas) location.

Respondents in the second phase were selected according to the same criteria as the first, and comprised a mixture of men and women, young and old, and rural and urban inhabitants. Teachers, students, religious elders, local leaders and government officials were interviewed along with shopkeepers, taxi drivers, housewives and farmers. A wide spectrum of educational levels was represented.

### *Methods of data collection*

Research teams in both phases were entirely comprised of Afghan researchers. In the first phase, the AREU research team conducted the data collection themselves, and in the second phase this was done through partner organisations with AREU team members providing continuous feedback on transcripts. Staff from partner organisations were

<sup>40</sup> In Ghazni and Nangarhar, the partner was the Organisation for Sustainable Development and Research (OSDR). In Nimroz, the partner organisation was Relief International (RI).

trained in qualitative research methodologies by AREU research staff in Kabul both before data collection began and at a mid-point during the project. AREU research staff also visited the field sites (with the exception of Nimroz) during the data collection to assist and support the research teams.<sup>41</sup>

In phase one, qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted as informal conversations with individuals, and FGDs were conducted as group discussions within similar demographic sectors (for example in classes of secondary school students). While these discussions were useful, it was felt that more substantive information was gained through individual conversation and thus in the second phase, interviews with individuals were prioritised with few FGDs conducted. In both phases, open-ended questions were used that began with the subject of the last elections, so as to draw on more concrete experiences to begin with.

### *Limitations*

The research made every effort to ensure that the methodology used for this project was sound and reliable. There remain some limitations, however, which are readily acknowledged:

1. The data is not representative of Afghanistan as a whole. It merely reflects the views of a broad range of diverse opinions in six different provinces across the country.
2. It was not possible to interview as many women as men, especially in rural areas. This was due to limited access and limited time to build enough trust among the communities that were not familiar with the research teams. Of a total of 209 interviews and FGDs, 82 were with women. Although not as numerous as the interviews with men, however, many of the conversations with women were longer and gathered more contextual information since they tended to take place inside the home and were thus more informal in nature.
3. Due to security concerns, the districts selected in insecure provinces were not as remote as

<sup>41</sup> A visit to Nimroz was planned, but cancelled due to the lack of air travel available to the province following a plane crash in May 2010.

the sampling design initially determined and were (in Nangarhar and Ghazni) close to the provincial centres.

4. Trends in perceptions of democracy are difficult to detect due to the fact that *people’s views on the subject are changeable*. This was clear in some cases when second interviews were conducted with respondents and different perspectives were related each time. The analysis in this paper is presented as an indication of *some* of the common themes found to exist among diverse and differing viewpoints.
5. The word “democracy” is itself problematic. This is because for many, the English word is more familiar than its Dari or Pashto equivalent (*mardum salari* and *woleswaqi*). As such, it carries connotations of the Soviet regime in Afghanistan under the PDPA, or of Western liberal culture. The research teams were careful to acknowledge this difficulty and thus used alternative ways of exploring the issue— such as in talking about decision-making in a village or the selection of leaders— over the course of the interview. When at the end of the interview questions about the word “democracy” in particular were asked, the English word was used first since it was more familiar to most people (it tended to be more educated respondents that referred to the term by its Dari or Pashto equivalents). This was followed by the Dari or Pashto term if “democracy” in English was not understood.
6. Democracy is also often used as a word very similar to or sometimes synonymous with “freedom” or “*azadi*.” When respondents used the word *azadi*, this was duly noted by the research team.

## 3.2 Provincial contexts

### *Kabul Province*

As the administrative centre of Afghanistan, Kabul Province is unique in almost all respects. Kabul City alone is thought to have between three and five million inhabitants and is growing rapidly as

the urban centre of the country due to rural-urban migration. The city is ethnically diverse, although certain areas within it are dominated by particular ethnic groups. Outlying rural districts in Kabul Province, such as Qarabagh, Istalif, and Surobi, are largely comprised of Tajik and Pashtun inhabitants.

As might be expected, Kabul has a comparatively high literacy rate and is a centre for state and private education at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. With 24-hour electricity now installed in most central areas of the city, a large number of Kabul residents have access to TV and radio along with print media. Security is relatively good in the city; while insurgent attacks may disrupt daily life from time to time, in general people carry out their day-to-day business unhindered by security concerns. Good security has also resulted in a disproportionately visible international presence compared to the rest of the country, though international military forces have become less prominent since security for the city itself was handed over to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).

Data from interviews in Kabul strongly reflect these provincial characteristics. Although a mixed demographic was selected for the sampling design, all perspectives given were educated and reflected a clear awareness of the political activities of candidates, for example, in the run up to the presidential and PC elections. Interviewees included members of political parties, whose central offices were based in Kabul, and other activists in the nongovernmental organisation (NGO) and advocacy sector. The city is also home to a number of Afghans who have spent significant time abroad. This accounts again for high levels of education and also an awareness of how governments in other countries function and provide services for their citizens. It also contributes to the city’s political diversity, which encompasses a spectrum of different political and religious views from liberal to staunchly conservative.

Powerholders in Kabul City are plentiful and range from influential *wakil-i-gozars* (heads of small urban areas) to religious elders and mullahs, and commanders and party leaders. The Mayor of Kabul

**Table 1. Provincial profiles\***

<i>Province</i>	<i>Population Estimate</i>	<i>Number of MPs</i>	<i>Number of PC Members</i>	<i>Governor</i>
Kabul	3.69 million	33	29	-
Balkh	1.19 million	11	19	Ustad Atta Noor
Parwan	610,000	6	15	Basir Salangi
Nangarhar	1.38 million	14	19	Gul Agha Sherzai
Ghazni	1.13 million	11	19	Gen. Mohammad Musa Ahmadzai
Nimroz	151,000	2	9	Ghulum Destagir Azad

\*Population statistics are estimates and notoriously variable. These are official Central Statistics Organization (CSO) figures published for 2010-11 (“Estimated Population of Afghanistan 2010/11,” [Kabul: CSO, 2011]). As an example, other figures cited for the population of Nimroz include 118,000 (Government of Afghanistan, “Provincial Development Plan: Nimroz Provincial Profile” [Kabul: Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, 2008], 1) and 272,000 (Relief International, “Relief International Nimroz Office: Rapid Rural Appraisal Report,” [Nimroz: RI, 2009]). The variance in this case could be largely the result of refugee movement across the Afghan-Iranian border.

at the time of writing—Engineer Mohammad Younus Nawandesh—is a recent appointment who has instigated the long-overdue repaving of the city’s streets. This has quickly earned him the respect of many, who compare him favourably to his apparently corrupt predecessor. The main source of power and patronage in Kabul, however, is the central government, and the personalities within the executive in particular.

### ***Balkh Province***

Balkh Province is located in the north of Afghanistan, bordering Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to the north across the Amu Darya River. Home to the growing and modern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, the province is composed mainly of Tajik and Arab<sup>42</sup> ethnic groups along with a sizeable Hazara, Uzbek and Turkmen population. A number of Pashtun communities also exist, primarily as a result of the relocation of government officials and redistribution of land over the course of the early- to mid-twentieth century.<sup>43</sup> Despite some tensions, ethnic groups in Balkh have generally co-existed peacefully since 2001.

42 The term “Arab” refers here to groups of Afghans who claim descent from the Prophet Muhammad and who refer to themselves as “Arabs,” but who do not speak Arabic.

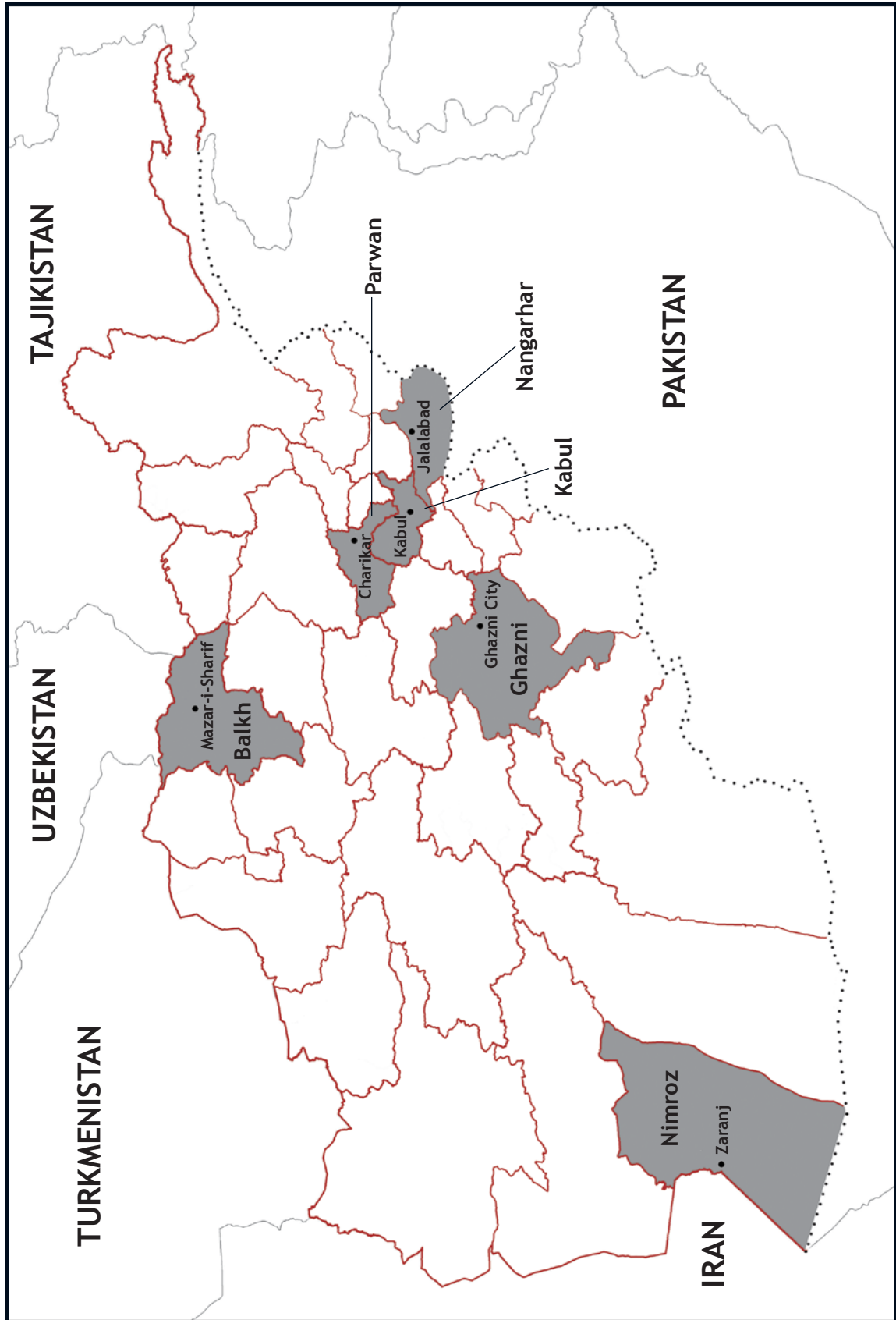
43 With thanks to Mohammad Muneer Salamzai for his contribution to this historical perspective.

Due to the presence of such a large urban centre, Balkh Province has a high literacy rate. Mazar City competes with Kabul in terms of the public and private educational facilities available for its inhabitants (including Balkh University) along with other services such as paved roads and health facilities. Reliable electricity is available to most city residents and also to those living in districts close to the urban centre. In the last five years, the city has seen huge development in terms of construction, road-paving and the provision of modern facilities, largely due to the interventions of the Provincial Governor, Atta Mohammad Noor. Representing a significant investment in the renovation of the city, these interventions have made a considerable difference to the lives of many city residents. Such improvements were evident in the data collected, which reflected a generally educated demographic who were largely aware of political events occurring in both Mazar and Kabul. However, while many urban interviewees had access to television and radio, this was not the case in the rural study district, where there was less information available about events outside the province.

Security in the province is generally good, although recent reports suggest that violence in neighbouring Kunduz is starting to spill over into



Figure 1. Map of study provinces



Balkh's northern Turkmen districts.<sup>44</sup> In general, however, Governor Atta maintains a tight control over the majority of the province. His policy of incorporating most ethnic leaders and area commanders into his system of governing has minimised ethnic tensions, and for the most part he controls a monopoly of violence in the region. His dominance of political and economic networks is also pervasive—large contracts for construction and other projects are largely restricted to his affiliates, and all the current MPs are said to be connected to varying degrees either to him or to his party Jamiat-i-Islami.

### *Parwan Province*

Parwan is located to the north of Kabul Province, stretching across the plains that link Kabul with Panjshir Province and the Salang Pass across the Hindu Kush Mountains. Its population is majority Tajik, with a number of Pashtun and Hazara communities. Trade activity occurs for the most part in the provincial centre of Charikar, and along the main road which runs through the district centre and forms part of the central trade route from Kabul to Mazar. Charikar is situated approximately one hour's drive from Kabul a number of residents commute regularly to the city. The proximity to the Kabul also allows Parwan MPs, for example, to live there and return to their constituency on a regular basis. Services are limited, with less than half of 6-13 year-olds attending school.<sup>45</sup> Many residents of Charikar complain bitterly about the lack of electricity and water provision, claiming that the recently installed pylons in the area carry electricity to Kabul but do not provide connections to a power source for Parwan.<sup>46</sup>

Due to its strategic location between Panjshir and Kabul, Parwan was at the forefront of Soviet-Afghan War as well as the resistance against the Taliban.

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44 Interviews among the Turkmen community for the AREU research project on parliamentary elections in Kaldar and Shortepa Districts, Balkh Province.

45 Sogol Zand, "The Impact of Microfinance Programmes on Women's Lives: A Case Study in Parwan province" (Kabul: AREU, 2010), 7.

46 Interviews, residents of Charikar.

Security in the current context is variable, and largely depends on the often unstable relationship between the province's two leading commanders. The province also plays host to the well-known US air base and detention centre at Bagram. In general, Parwan has a religious history and was home to a famous Sunni Imam, Abu Hanifa. As such, the main powerholders in the area are largely religious figures, with the *ulema shura* controlling much of the decision-making authority in the province.<sup>47</sup>

### *Nangarhar Province*

Nangarhar is one of Afghanistan's most populous provinces due to the presence of the rapidly expanding city of Jalalabad and the fertile land surrounding it. Situated approximately three hours' drive east of Kabul and bordering Pakistan, the province is also well-positioned in terms of water supply and trade. Largely Pashtun in ethnicity, minorities include Tajik, Arab, Pashai, Sikh and Hindu. In general there is a good relationship between the majority Pashtun community and other groups. The provincial capital of Jalalabad City is the eastern economic centre of Afghanistan. It is generally well-developed, offering some of the best hospitals and one of the best universities in the country. Access to schools and other services such as electricity in the city and surrounding districts is widespread, as is the availability of TV, radio and other media. However, population pressure is putting increasing strain on the urban infrastructure, and modernisation efforts are significantly behind those in Mazar.

Like Balkh, however, Nangarhar cannot be assessed without considering the figure of its Governor, Gul Agha Sherzai. Sherzai was appointed 2005 after serving three years as Governor of Kandahar. As in Kandahar, he has been able assert control over the border crossings, levying customs taxes to put toward the "Sherzai Reconstruction Fund" (as one respondent put it) for the rebuilding of Jalalabad City. Sherzai's activities are a source of significant resentment. While this is largely due to suspicions

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47 Information for this section was updated with the assistance of Dr Abdul Mateen Imran, Senior Research Assistant, AREU. It also draws on information compiled by the research team for this project in 2009.

around the money he makes from customs taxes, his withdrawal from the presidential race in 2009 has also proved particularly contentious. It was widely thought that he had made a deal with Karzai in exchange for another post in government. The governor’s interference in property disputes in the land-poor province are also the source of significant contention.

In response to these issues, 13 PC members have formed an anti-Sherzai bloc, and apparently criticise him on many issues including trade, reconstruction and land disputes. Unlike in other provinces, the Nangarhar PC is an influential body and commands a certain respect among the people. For this reason, the delay in PC results in 2009—and the perceived altering of these results in between the polling station and the announcement of official results—was extremely significant in its effect on local politics.

### **Ghazni Province**

Ghazni Province is situated in the centre of Afghanistan, to the southwest of Kabul. The provincial centre of Ghazni City is under-resourced, with little electricity and few essential services. This pattern is reflected across the province, which has limited access to education and healthcare facilities.<sup>48</sup> The province is ethnically diverse, with large Pashtun and Hazara populations and a small minority of Tajiks. Ethnic tension is generally low, but the increasing levels of insurgent activity in the province have led to the further segregation of different groups and a pervasive sense of insecurity in most areas of the province. One *Wolesi Jirga* candidate was killed in Qarabagh District, apparently by Taliban, six weeks before the 2010 parliamentary election.<sup>49</sup>

Power is centred in the hands of commanders and political factions in Ghazni. Current Governor

48 Government of Afghanistan, “Provincial Development Plan: Ghazni Provincial Profile” (Kabul: Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, 2008).

49 “Second Candidate Killed by Taliban,” Pajhwok Afghan News, 7 August 2010, <http://www.pajhwok.com/viewstory.asp?lng=eng&id=99816> (accessed 21 April, 2011).

Faizanullah Faizan is a former Hizb-i-Islami commander who espouses a policy of inclusion, making public overtures to the Taliban and mujahiddin to join the reconciliation process of the Karzai government. However, this has led to suspicions that he is taking money from a number of different sources and may even be facilitating some of the insecurity in the province. The Taliban also have a considerable influence over some parts of the province, most notably in rural areas. While they seem to enjoy a substantial degree of support, reports of Taliban coercion and intimidation of the local population are not uncommon, and they regularly use communities as bases for raids on ISAF or government forces

Given this level of insecurity, it is interesting that the institutions of government exist and to some degree function in Ghazni. In 2010, 11 *Wolesi Jirga* members were still in post after a five-year term, and in the parliamentary elections of the same year 84 people contested these positions. Between 2005 and 2010, five of the 11 Ghazni representatives were Hazara, reflecting quite accurately their percentage of the population in Ghazni, although not necessarily the perceived structure of power between ethnic groups. However, in the 2011 elections, Hazara MPs secured all 11 seats. This was partly due to insurgent groups’ apparently successful attempts to boycott (or at least scare people into avoiding) elections in Pashtun areas, and was the subject of considerable political debate in the months following the election.

### **Nimroz Province**

Situated on the border with Iran, Nimroz is the most remote of all the provinces studied for this project. Its huge geographical area contrasts with a tiny population, though refugees returning from Iran have contributed to significant growth in recent years. Ethnically the province is diverse: Pashtun, Baluch, Tajik and Barahawi communities form the bulk of the population, and tension between these groups is minimal. Economically, the province is dependent on Iran with cross-border trade making up most

of the local revenue.<sup>50</sup> In part due to its remote location, Nimroz has very few services available to its inhabitants, and electricity, healthcare and education are luxuries not available to all (total literacy in Nimroz according to one source amounts to 22 percent<sup>51</sup>). However, drinking water is by far the most significant resource deficiency.

Security has been problematic in Nimroz recently: in May 2010 a suicide attack on the PC building killed three people including a female member of the PC.<sup>52</sup> However, this attack was unusual in its scale as very few attacks of a similar size and intensity have been conducted in the region. The most insecure area of the province is Khash Rod District, which borders both Helmand and Farah Provinces and has seen the spillover of insurgent activity from these areas. The border with Iran, near to the provincial

centre of Zaranj, is also problematic due to the trafficking of narcotics and people. There is no permanent International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) base in Nimroz province and a very limited ANSF presence.

Powerholders in Nimroz include the governor, Dr Ghulum Dastagir Azad, who is a medical doctor and came to the post in 2005. Dr Azad is an ethnic Pashtun, and according to study respondents is generally disliked by Nimroz inhabitants.<sup>53</sup> The province also has two representatives for the *Wolesi Jirga*. At the time of study, the existing incumbents were re-contesting their seats in the upcoming elections. Complaints from respondents regarding these individuals largely centre around their infrequent visits to the province and their lack of ability to provide services.

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50 This can be in both licit and illicit forms of trade (RI, "Rapid Rural Assessment," 4).

51 GoA, "Nimroz Province."

52 Gul Makai. She had been interviewed for this study three days earlier. For a news story on this event see "Militants Launch Deadly Suicide Attack on Afghan City," *Dawn*, 5 May 2010, <http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/news/world/04-afghanistan-militant-attack-qs-08> (accessed 21 April 2011).

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53 Various interviews, Nimroz Province.

## 4. Democracy as an Imported Concept

One of the most common themes cutting across interviews in all provinces and across the demographic spectrum was the idea that the word and system of “democracy” was not indigenous to Afghanistan and had been introduced from outside. For some, democracy was altogether alien and unwelcome; for others, it was a Western system that could potentially be moulded to the Afghan context, given certain modifications. This first section on the findings from the study explores these differences in detail. It looks at varying perceptions of imported democracy—as an imperial project; as inherently different to “Islamic democracy”; as freedom—and how it might be contained within the *charchaokat-i-Islam* (the “four fixed edges of Islam,” or an Islamic framework); and as an international standard of rule of law and development that had not been achieved in Afghanistan. It also looks at elections, which were one aspect of democracy not seen as negatively foreign and widely considered as positive mechanisms for public participation.

### 4.1 A new tyranny? Perceptions of democracy as hegemonic imperialism

A view which varied in intensity across the different provinces selected for this study, though particularly noticeable in Nangarhar and Ghazni, was that democracy had been brought to Afghanistan to serve the greater political goals of foreign countries. Thus, while the idea of selecting government by popular election is acceptable across the board, a widespread and deep-seated suspicion of the word “democracy” is still very much present in certain areas:

*I think democracy is good for the Afghan government but...we don't want government which is in others' hands. We don't want democracy which is applied by foreigners.*

– Male teacher, urban Ghazni

*During the war with Russia the mujahiddin preached against democracy, so people hate it.*

– Female teacher, urban Ghazni

*Democracy is a Greek word—“demo” means people and “cracy” means chair or government. In democracy all the people take part in making decisions about whatever happens in the country, for example in politics, society, education and the military...The government should be chosen by the people, and not by outsiders. At the moment the president is chosen by them but we can't say anything.*

– Female beautician, urban Ghazni

*Democracy is the government of the people by the people for the people, but in Afghanistan we have the government of the outsiders by the outsiders for the Afghan people. The actual definition is reversed in Afghanistan.*

– Male student, urban Balkh

*Afghanistan is under the control of others; our president himself is under the control of others. How can it then be a democracy here? It is just a ridiculing of democracy.*

– Male unemployed former driver, semi-urban Nangarhar

*In the Afghan constitution it is the duty of the government to promote and implement democracy. So democracy within the limits of our constitution is acceptable to Afghans. Capital punishment is a legal act according to our laws and court decisions. But as we see in the media some international organisations want to prevent execution, and this is a clear interference in our internal affairs. Our request from the international community is that they should let us implement our own laws. We respect the kind of democracy which is according to our law and we will struggle to promote this.*

– Male PC member, urban Nangarhar





Former UN Special Representative Kai Eide, US Senator John Kerry and President Hamid Karzai during a press conference concerning 2009's Presidential election (Photo: UNAMA)

The idea of democracy being used as a way to impose foreign interference is clear here, indicated particularly by the second statement regarding the mujahiddin's militant stance against the PDPA in the 1980s. Afghanistan has experienced a number of attempts at externally-imposed rule, and thus it is not really surprising that for many, the post-2001 attempt to democratise is seen as another of these impositions. This statement represents a provincial viewpoint, however, which is not necessarily shared by other respondents in Kabul who still blame the mujahiddin for destroying the city in the 1990s. Nevertheless, also clear from the statements above is the sense of resentment felt toward this interference in Afghan affairs on the part of a foreign power. But while this interference or imposition in itself is evidently unwelcome, it is necessary to explore further the differing reasons why this is the case, and what kinds of intervention provoke the most negative reactions. Afghan voices raised against "the West" and its presence in Afghanistan appear to have become louder and more prevalent over time, which could reflect the gathering pace of disillusionment with the internationally-assisted Karzai government and the way Taliban propaganda, informed by the rhetoric of Al Qaida, has resonated with an increasing number of people as a result. In the last quotation, however, the respondent states that "democracy"

is acceptable if conducted within the bounds of the Afghan constitution. Given that the constitution itself was composed with a significant degree of foreign oversight and intervention, this is not a small concession.

Over and above interference in general, it thus appears that there are some very specific interventions that create more resentment than others. One respondent above talks about the death penalty, but other examples point to a general concern that the foreign presence and advent of democracy in Afghanistan could pose a threat to Afghan "culture," "traditions" or religious practices:

*One of my friends told me about his trip to a foreign country. He said that he had left the airport there to take a taxi, and the taxi driver was an old woman. He asked her "Don't you have any sons?" and the woman answered, "yes, I do have sons—but they don't take care of me. I work and find food for myself." So that is their democracy, that the son does not value his mother...We don't want foreign democracy. We support a democracy that is in accordance with Islam, the Afghan constitution and Afghan culture.*

— Male head of local *shura*, urban Nangarhar

*The situation here is not tolerable because they are going the way of the West. As you see in the media, their president is abused and their women are walking around naked<sup>54</sup> in the cities. This is called a democratic government.*

— Male head of NSP *shura*, rural Nangarhar

*[Democracy] is the culture of foreigners... we want freedom and democracy that are not contradictory to Islam and that are not harmful to our own culture...80 percent of our people are against the foreigners and do not accept their policies.*

— Male student, urban Ghazni

54 The word "naked" here is translated literally, but care should be taken in interpretation. The Dari/Pashtu word *luch/louss* is used to convey anything beyond women walking in public without a head scarf. As such, it is probably used here to describe the comparative dress codes of Afghan and Western women and is not meant in the literal sense.

*According to Western democracy a married woman can have a boyfriend, while this kind of democracy is not acceptable in Afghanistan.*

– Male teacher, urban Kabul

*We have copied some democratic values from Western countries and Afghanistan has signed some human rights declarations, but I don't think they are adoptable in our Islamic society.*

– Female community leader, Kabul

The role of Islam and perceptions of its stance in opposition to Western values will be discussed in a later section. However, it is interesting to note here that the topics people choose to talk about when discussing the potentially negative effects of the spread of democracy in Afghanistan by and large involve the nature of social and family values or practices. The observations and perceptions about “Western democratic” culture appear to come from increasing levels of exposure either to that culture itself, in the form of trips overseas (or knowing people who have taken them), in seeing the activities of foreigners working in Afghanistan firsthand—and especially by way of the media. As post-2001 reconstruction efforts increased access to electricity in urban areas, it opened increased access to visual media that had previously been tightly restricted by the Taliban authorities. The influx of images coming from overseas this brought—and the relative inability to control these images—has thus contributed to the negative perceptions of Western culture and the (not unfounded) worry that they will infiltrate throughout society. There exists a certain double standard, however, as soap operas, movies and pornography remain as popular as they are easily available, and are not imposed on those choosing to view them. Furthermore, in a context in which the unbridled critique of “Western culture” is common, even in vogue, in Afghanistan, it is unsurprising to find respondents attempting to distance themselves (in public) from a lifestyle widely perceived to be immoral.

### ***Nimroz: a dissenting voice***

In rural Nimroz Province, where there is limited electricity available, it is notable that those giving definitions of the word “democracy” tended to

view it in a different light to respondents in other provinces:

*Democracy means freedom in the way people live, and freedom of speech. In democracy we should consider the rights of women, children and citizens in general. In my opinion democracy means freedom in all areas of life.*

– Female teacher, rural Nimroz

*It was a long time since I was at school, and I have forgotten a lot. But I know that democracy means freedom of speech, where people can advocate for their rights...For the moment there is no democracy in the government.*

– Female housewife, rural Nimroz

*Democracy means freedom so that people can talk freely and transmit their problems to the government.*

– Male head of NSP *shura*, semi-urban Nimroz

These statements come from educated respondents who do not have ready access to television in their homes. They are all the immediate responses to the final interview question, “What is democracy, in your opinion?” Although respondents often qualified these answers by highlighting the need to situate democracy within Islamic norms and traditions, almost no one talked about it as threatening in terms of a cultural or imperial imposition. Reflecting some of the views of educated respondents in other provinces, such as Kabul and urban Nangarhar, most did not view the current government of Afghanistan as a functioning or “real” democracy. However, they stressed that the government should be aiming toward a more democratic and equal society in which there were fewer warlords in power, less discrimination between ethnicities and elections without fraud.

Evidently there is more to this anomaly that the lack of access to television, since even those in Nimroz who did have more direct access to local media had broadly the same ideas and were not openly hostile to democracy as a cultural imposition. Two other significant variables also need to be considered: geographic location, and the lack of ISAF forces and generally limited foreign presence.

Nimroz is situated on the border with Iran and is the site of considerable repatriation of Afghan refugees returning home. Many residents of Nimroz have spent a significant amount of time in Iran or move back and forth between the two countries. As such, they have sometimes had the good fortune to experience schooling there,<sup>55</sup> or have at least seen the way a different, higher capacity Islamic state functions. A cultural as well as geographic proximity exists and has facilitated a certain fluidity of customs and practices across the border. Furthermore, respondents talked about being able to go about their lives in Iran according to their own [Afghan] norms and traditions. One woman from Ghazni, who had also spent time in Iran, talked about a similar experience during time spent living there:

*Democracy must be according to the culture of the people...When we were in Iran, we were wearing clothes according to our tradition and we were going about our everyday business according to our customs and culture. This was acceptable to us.*

– Housewife, semi-urban Ghazni

The respondent implies that she was able to adopt a lifestyle similar to the one she was accustomed to in Afghanistan, and appreciated the choice that allowed her to do so. In Nimroz, where a greater concentration of people have lived in Iran for considerable periods of time, it is likely that this factor could have affected the data across a wide spectrum of respondents. While not all perspectives of Iran were positive (for example in terms of its treatment of Afghans within its borders, or its perceived interference in Afghan politics), people's experiences of living there have nonetheless had a clear impact on their opinions and outlook

The second potentially contributing variable is the lack of foreign troops in Nimroz. There are very few foreigners in general working in the province, which also has a limited UN and NGO presence. While neighbouring Helmand has been the location of sustained international military presence for a number of years, the effects of this presence do not

<sup>55</sup> Good fortune: due to the fact that in many cases schooling is denied to Afghan refugees in Iran due to their second-class status.

appear in respondent perspectives in and around Zaranj, on the province's Western border. This in itself is important, and could contribute to the way, for example, the attacks of suicide bomber and insurgent activity in general are described with great hatred for the perpetrators, rather than sympathy for their cause. For example, when discussing the case of Gul Makai—a PC member who was killed in a recent attack on the governor's residence in Zaranj City—respondents without exception used the prefix *shahid* (martyr):

*The previous members of the PC didn't do anything for the people, only Gul Makai was good— she loved the country and she worked for marginalised people in society, but the enemies of Afghanistan made her a martyr.*

– Male 11th grade student, rural Nimroz

Makai is seen as a hero, the victim of hateful insurgent attacks and certainly not as deserving of her fate for having worked in the government. This serves as a dramatic contrast to other study provinces—even including relatively secure ones, such as Balkh—where respondents frequently blame insecurity on foreign troops, associating their presence to varying degrees with the Western “invasion” of Afghanistan and the imposition of Western values and culture. For the residents of Nimroz, talk of the advent of a democratic regime does not appear to represent an immediate challenge to one's identity as Afghan or Muslim—and is not automatically opposed or set in stark relief against the tenets of an Islamic society.

## 4.2 Western/Islamic democracy and the *charchaokat-i-Islam*

With the exception of Nimroz, most interviews conducted for the study suggested a very clear dividing line between “Western” and “Islamic” democracy. This follows on from the discussion above concerning the perceptions of cultural imperialism and the concern about the spread of Western, secular values. Against this context, the divisions made by respondents between the two kinds of democracy appeared, on the surface at least, to indicate an irreconcilable binary opposition:



*There are two kinds of democracy. One is Islamic democracy and the other is Western democracy. Western democracy is not acceptable and applicable for Afghans because it is opposed to their religion and faith.*

– Male teacher, urban Kabul

*[Democracy] is not a good system, it is an American system and we do not accept it. If we do then Islam and non-Islam will be mixed up, God help us...Foreigners try to harm Islam but we don't want this, we want freedom which is not against Islam.*

– Male taxi driver, urban Ghazni

*Afghanistan is an Islamic country. We want Islamic democracy here. We don't accept Western democracy. We just want to have Islamic democracy.*

– Female carpet weaver, semi-urban Nangarhar

This distinction was made in provinces as diverse as Balkh, Kabul, Nangarhar and Ghazni, suggesting that the varying levels of security in these provinces and their demographic differences did not alter the fact that many people strongly believed in the outright opposition between Western and Islamic democracy. This is partly the result of the synonymous use of the words “democracy” and “*azadi*” (freedom), where Western democracy was often described as the implementation of unlimited freedom in which people’s behaviour was not confined to any particular social norm or rule. Indeed, it was often portrayed as an excuse used to condone otherwise unacceptable behaviour, along the lines of “who cares? It’s a democracy.”<sup>56</sup>

*Democracy means freedom but this freedom means that a person should do whatever his mind tells him to do. But if this democracy is not against Islamic rules, and stays within the limits of Islam and doesn't break Afghan rules and culture, then it is acceptable.*

– Male teacher, urban Ghazni

*Western countries are showing us that in democracy you can do whatever you want. And we should have democracy here, but we Muslims should manage it. The new democracy which has been recommended for us is not good and it is against our religious and cultural rules. We should not break these rules in the name of democracy.*

– Housewife, urban Ghazni

*Democracy is freedom of speech. If you stay naked or clothed, it is freedom. We do not support this kind of democracy. We want Islamic democracy. Women should work in accordance with Islamic law and in hijab [head covering]. They can then work in government office to defend their rights.*

– Male former government official, semi-urban Nangarhar

The concept of what a democracy within an “Islamic framework” would look like from an Afghan perspective remains ambiguous, and there is no existing political debate on the content of such a system

*Democracy is good for Afghanistan but only if it is within the *charchaokat-i-Islam* and in the light of the Hadith [sayings of the Prophet Muhammad]. For example, I am a Muslim and I cannot forsake Islam.*

– Male head of NSP shura, rural Nangarhar

When pushed further, respondents tended to emphasise that a certain kind of freedom was acceptable, however, as long as it was “freedom within an Islamic framework.” This framework—*charchaokat*, in Dari literally meaning “four fixed edges”—seemed to symbolise vividly a concept of limitation or boundary outside of which were the aspects of Western democracy considered unacceptable in Afghanistan. Though this limitation was widely talked about, it was rarely described in detail.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the concept of what this kind

56 This was a finding apparent in the first phase of research (See Larson, “Toward an Afghan Democracy,” 9-10) that emerged even more strongly during the second phase. The concern with “excessive freedom” is not new—indeed, as John Keane explains, it was expressed by the Greeks and also by Islamic philosopher Nasr al-Farabi in the 10th century AD. Keane, *Life and Death*, 145.

57 See Larson, “Toward an Afghan Democracy,” 11-12.

of democracy would look like from an Afghan perspective remains ambiguous, and there is no existing political debate on the content of such a system. However, the statement that democracy needs to be Islamic *as opposed to Western* may be more of a reaction against perceived foreign imposition than a positive expression of support for the outlook of the country's Islamic leaders—many of whom have a long history of coopting Islam for political or self-serving ends. It is thus possible that if the foreign military and civilian presence in Afghanistan were to decrease, this focus on emphasising Islamic identity might shift toward more pragmatic considerations such as issues of corruption and service provision.

For this research, the general lack of specificity about what was contained within the Islamic framework was partially due to how respondents related to their interviewers. Since they were largely from the same religious background, the same ethnicity and often the same local area, respondents often presumed they shared a common understanding of these phrases and thus saw no need to provide further explanation. In order to remedy this gap, AREU hosted a number of FGDs in Kabul in which the research teams who had collected the data were invited to share their thoughts about the differences between Islamic and Western democracy—especially with regard to what the *charchaokat-i-Islam* might and might not encompass. The lists that were drawn up in these sessions touched on numerous points such as the issue of conversion (as mentioned in the final quote above) or the responsibility of sons toward their parents. However, by far the most visible theme was the differences mentioned in relation to women.

### 4.3 Women's behaviour: Male and female perspectives

The question of women and women's behaviour—as can be seen across many quotations thusfar—cut across most definitions of what is acceptable, and what is not, within an “Islamic democracy.” This is unsurprising in the context of the extreme contrasts made by some respondents between

women's assumed behaviour in Western societies and their acceptable conduct in Afghanistan, where for the most part they are considered responsible for maintaining family honour via adherence to appropriate norms such as *purdah* (female seclusion). Nevertheless, the pervasiveness of this theme is hard to ignore:

*Foreigners want there to be a democracy in which everyone has their rights...[They] want women to walk around in the cities and claim their rights but Islam says that women should be in hijab and that they should not talk with other men [to whom they are not related]. Islam says that these things are illegal. The foreigners want to harm Islam by encouraging women to come outside and behave like this. This in itself causes harm because then women want the kinds of freedom that are not permissible in Islam.*

— Male student, urban Ghazni

*If you implement Islamic democracy, this would be good. For example, if a person wants his daughter to get married, it is necessary for him to ask his daughter whether she agrees or not. If she remains silent, it means she agrees—and if she speaks against the marriage, it is clear that she refuses. This is an Islamic democracy. Foreign democracy is different because there are no restrictions on men or women. In Islam, gaining knowledge is incumbent on men and women but within the limitations of the religion. If there is a threat to the respect and value of the woman then it is not necessary that she goes to school.*

— Male teacher, urban Nangarhar

*Democracy is a Greek word and it means people's government. Islam is not against this but it ensures that people's rights are respected and not wasted. For example, in democratic countries, every 24 hours hundreds of children are aborted and their life is taken away from them. But in Islamic rules and regulations adultery is unlawful and a serious offence. From one side this protects the lives of infants and from the other side it saves us from the infection of the AIDS virus. Nikah [marriage] is an important Sunnah<sup>58</sup> of our Prophet and it*

<sup>58</sup> *Sunnah* refers to a way of life or habit adopted by the Prophet Mohammad and emulated by Muslims as a holy and appropriate practice.

*helps to avoid every kind of disease caused by sexual promiscuity. But in democratic countries a woman can have illegal relations with many men, which causes many kinds of diseases.*

– Male PC member, urban Nangarhar

These statements clearly demonstrate the extent to which women are considered responsible for maintaining family honour and also a significant concern on the part of male respondents about what might happen if they were given the freedom experienced by Western women. With these perceptions in mind, it is unsurprising that there is a considerable resistance to the introduction of Western democracy given the perceived social upheaval that this might incur. Looking at women’s perspectives, however, a different narrative is apparent. While it is no less focused on Islam than their male counterparts, it is more concerned that the religion itself can be misinterpreted and in some cases needs to be clarified and its principles strengthened:

*Democracy means freedom, so people should not wrongly take advantage of this freedom. Women should be given freedom according to the framework of Islam, in order that they might lawfully defend their rights. In our village women are always like servants. Can a woman be cured of her illnesses through spells and prayers? Our men are telling us that we should go to the mullah for a spell and this way we will get better. They do not allow us to go to male doctors because they are not our relatives. In our village women and girls are treated like animals—they are bought and sold at a fixed price. Is this democracy?*

– Housewife, rural Ghazni

*Dear sister, when you talk about democracy you mean freedom—but what kind of freedom do we have? I will tell you a story. My sister studied until 12th grade but my father then engaged her to a person who was very poorly educated. My sister insisted that she did not want to marry this person and asked her father if she could continue studying. She was not allowed to do this however and she was married to this person in [an insecure] district. It is years since we have seen her—my father and brothers*



Women vote in 2009’s presidential election (Photo: Independent Election Commission)

*went to their house to ask permission to see her but they said “no, you sold your daughter to us for money, so why are you chasing us now?” My sister is very unhappy. If you take this example of an educated girl who has to live in this condition, how can you say we have freedom? As women, what should we do with the government’s democracy?*

The woman speaking in the first quotation here implies that the lack of freedom she and other women in her village experience is in fact un-Islamic, and that by clarifying the requirements and limits of Islam she would in fact be entitled to more, and not less, freedom. In Kabul, there is a widespread opinion among government workers and members of the elite (of both genders) that the inhumane treatment of women is due to a misunderstanding of Islam and a merging of religious and cultural practices.<sup>59</sup> However, this was not widely talked about by male respondents in rural areas—possibly as a result of the cultural stigma against men talking about women with unfamiliar men (the interview team). As such, it is not possible to determine these men’s perspective on the way Islamic and cultural values intertwine in practice.

The issue of women presents a key dilemma in terms of the progression of an Islamic democracy in Afghanistan. Current cultural practices and a widespread lack of education (neither of which are

<sup>59</sup> Anna Larson, “A Mandate to Mainstream: Promoting Gender Equality in Afghanistan” (Kabul: AREU, 2008), 23.



likely to change overnight) tend to coincide with distinct advantage on the part of male privilege and power over women. As long as this is the case, any perceived attempt to disrupt this power dynamic will inevitably lead to resistance and potential conflict. As has been seen in the violent reactions to successive efforts to promote women's empowerment over the last century,<sup>60</sup> such interventions can end up more destructive than helpful in the long run if they are perceived as imposing an outside agenda without consultation or widespread acceptance from members of the public. It is clear that one of the key problems with "Western democracy" as described by male respondents in rural areas is its perceived challenge to gendered norms and the balance of power between men and women. Whether the "Islamic democracy" they offer as an alternative would be a democracy at all in the eyes of some of the Afghan women cited above, however, is a different matter altogether—and a question for further research.

#### 4.4 Elections: An Afghan institution?

In contrast to the more general discourse of democracy and democratisation, the idea of holding elections (which is not always directly associated with democracy) is not seen as a hostile imposition of foreign culture in Afghanistan. This is the case not only at a local level, where leaders are selected by community consensus, but also at the national level regarding elections and the phenomenon of majority rule. Furthermore, as the following quotations from urban *and* rural Ghazni and some insecure areas of rural Nimroz indicate, this sentiment is not restricted to secure areas:

*Parliamentary elections are the main symbol of freedom in Afghanistan, and this is why the parliament is called the house of the people. It doesn't matter whether they do their job in a good way or not—we are not going to let this symbol die...Our young generation should be well-educated and they must know the importance of elections.*

— Male teacher, urban Ghazni

*Elections are good for Afghanistan. MPs can assist the president—for example, we heard on the radio that the parliament took part in appointing ministers.*

— Male farmer, rural Ghazni

*Elections are very good for the people of a country, and they are interesting because the members of parliament work for the people of the country. Foreigners do not work for the good of the country.*

— Male teacher, rural Ghazni

*Parliament is very good and suitable for the government of Afghanistan. The members of parliament should do more work themselves to serve the people, however.*

— Male shopkeeper, urban Ghazni

Clear in these quotations is a sense of ownership over elections, and a link made between elections and the need for representatives to work for the country. The third respondent cited above went on to reject "democracy" outright as a foreign imposition that was not suited to the Afghan context—yet he was in favour of the idea of elections and participating in selecting representatives. However, experiences of what these representatives have been able to provide during their term in office are usually negative, with most respondents reporting a complete lack of service provision or visibility in their constituency. Furthermore, many interviewees claimed that the majority were corrupt, embezzling public funds for their own use and accumulating considerable sums of money for themselves and their families. Nevertheless, during the interview period there was a consistent degree of support for the idea of elections and—perhaps surprisingly in insecure areas—a general display of enthusiasm at the prospect of voting in the 2010 elections (although this did not appear to translate into actual participation on election day).

In Nimroz, respondents were from more remote rural areas than those interviewed in Ghazni<sup>61</sup> and other

60 Deniz Kandiyoti, "The Politics of Gender and Reconstruction in Afghanistan" (Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2005), 31.

61 The research team focused their data collection in one rural village, which was still not more than 20km away from the provincial centre, due to security problems.

provinces, and had voted without a great deal of exposure to televised debates or awareness-raising programmes such as civic education initiatives. Many were unfamiliar with election procedures, which reflects to some extent the degree of remoteness of the province from large cities. Most women interviewed in rural Nimroz said that they had been unsure of who to vote for, and had consulted their husbands or local elders for advice. However, one widow instead chose candidates according to their logos:

*I have voted five times in total, but I don't know who I voted for. One time I voted for a person with the logo of a grain of wheat and one time I voted for a person with a logo of three pens. When I saw the wheat logo I thought, “this person will bring us wheat,” and when I saw the pens logo I thought “this person might serve us through his education.” This seemed good to me so I voted for him.*

– Housewife, rural Nimroz

What is striking in this woman's case is the motivation to participate in spite of not knowing the candidates nor being familiar with the system. Furthermore, the logic presented by this respondent—despite the fact that symbols are actually randomly allocated, with each candidate allowed a choice of three—demonstrates a break from the often-assumed norm of women being told who to vote for. Evidently, this is not the case with all women in Nimroz, but some other women's stories of consultation with male family members or local leaders demonstrate the active steps they took to seek advice on the subject. This was notably different in rural and semi-urban Ghazni, and rural Nangarhar, where the majority of housewives interviewed had not participated in elections due to security concerns but had overheard their husbands talking about them.

Positive perceptions of the process or idea of elections were widespread across all provinces, but these perceptions were affected to varying degrees by people's actual experience and the prospect of fraud. One shopkeeper from urban Kabul emphasised that, in spite of fraud, elections were still a positive development in Afghanistan: “Our last two elections

were good and a big achievement for Afghans to continue it in future. Eighty percent of the elections were not free and fair, but it was still good.” However, not all respondents were so positive about their electoral experiences. In Nimroz, people had particularly strong views about the PC elections of 2009:

*Last year's PC election was not transparent. There was a lot of fraud and the provincial [governor's] office supported some specific candidates. We can't call these PC members representatives of the people because they printed about 4,000 fake cards in Iran and brought them back to Nimroz for the election. I found 180 of these cards and I brought them as proof to show the people responsible for the elections, but it didn't make any difference because these candidates still used their power to get elected. They represent the governor's house, not the people. Everyone knows about this—this incident of fraud was even broadcast on a programme on Tolo TV, Zang-i-Khater. The person who cheated is even now the representative of the Nimroz PC in the Meshrano Jirga [upper house of parliament]... There are only a few PC members who are real representatives of the people.*

– Female PC member, urban Nimroz

*In the PC election last year there were some existing PC members and also some new candidates, but about 70 percent of the*



*Officials examine evidence of fraud after 2010's parliamentary election (AREU file photo)*

There is a distinction to be made between respondents' general views of elections—which are seen in theory to be a positive process, and not a foreign imposition—and their actual experiences of elections, which have been marred with fraud, ambiguity, and the suspicion of foreign interference.

*election was fraudulent. The fraud was even broadcast in the media.*

– Female teacher, urban Nimroz

*During the PC election [one candidate] printed fake election cards in Iran, and it was said among people in our district that Tolo TV broadcasted this and showed these fake cards on television, but the election commission didn't do anything and he was introduced as the representative for the Meshrano Jirga anyway.*

– Male teacher, rural Nimroz

Incidents of fraudulent activity such as these were described by all respondents across the six provinces, although more vehemently in the second phase (in Nangarhar, Ghazni and Nimroz) than in the first due to the timing of data collection (interviews for the first phase being conducted before the 2009 presidential election, four years after the last set of polls). In Nangarhar, the stories told concerning fraud in the elections were as vivid as in Nimroz but with a different focus, centring on the widely publicised delay in announcing the official PC results. The following statement is representative of a considerable number of respondents from both urban and rural areas:

*Last year's PC election has discouraged people from voting. The Prophet Mohammad said that three things are always unknown: 1) death, 2) doomsday and 3) the soul. Nowadays, however, people say that four things are always unknown: the above three, and the results of the PC elections...The only reason that the results*

*were delayed was that in the first counting, the favourite candidates of foreigners were not successful. The foreigners then tried to change the results and eventually they succeeded in getting all of their candidates accepted. Then, later, the results were declared.*

– Male unemployed former driver, semi-urban Nangarhar

The respondent is referring here to how initial vote counts were released at the polling stations in the days immediately following the PC elections in 2009. These were then conveyed to Kabul, and after a delay of many weeks—longer in Nangarhar than elsewhere—the official results, which were different to those originally posted, were announced.<sup>62</sup> This incident has had a considerable effect on how people view elections in Nangarhar. The perception that the outcome is determined by foreigners is widespread and extremely damaging: in the view of the above respondent, it has discouraged people from voting.

The perception that the outcome of elections is in the hands of foreigners or high-level officials is not new to Afghanistan, and is reported to have been widespread in Kabul during municipality elections in the 1960s.<sup>63</sup> This is largely due to a significant mistrust in both the system and, in more recent years, in the intentions of foreign forces or development actors in the country. While the perception is speculation, it has been bolstered by President Karzai's similar and very public assertions about the fraudulent behaviour of international actors, and its potential effect on participation in future elections in Afghanistan cannot be underestimated.

There is thus a distinction to be made between respondents' general views of elections—which are seen in theory to be a positive process, and not a foreign imposition—and their actual experiences of elections, which have been

<sup>62</sup> This was also the case in counting processes during the 2005 Wolesi Jirga election, and again across all provinces (with Ghazni the most delayed) in 2010.

<sup>63</sup> Louis Dupree, "Afghanistan's Slow March to Democracy: Reflections on Kabul's Municipal Balloting," *American Universities Field Staff Reports, South Asia Series 7*, no. 1 (1963).

marred with fraud, ambiguity, and the suspicion of foreign interference. Negative views of election experiences were also frequently heard in respondent interviews for a later AREU study following the parliamentary election in 2010, which demonstrated how elections had served to widen the gap between citizen and state, instead of bridging it.<sup>64</sup>

## 4.5 Section summary

This section has explored varying meanings and perceptions of “democracy” in the Afghan context. It has focused specifically on the way the word “democracy” has often been associated with an imperial project being imposed on Afghanistan from outside; and on the perceived irreconcilable differences between Western democracy and Islam. It has also demonstrated a potential acceptance of a democracy fixed within an Islamic framework, and—critically—that elections and new democratic institutions are widely considered important as the building blocks of accountable government in Afghanistan. However, these are being progressively discredited as a result of fraudulent and non-transparent processes.

As such, it is possible to outline several key concerns and expectations expressed by study respondents across all six provinces regarding their government:

- That above all else, the system of governing in Afghanistan should be Afghan-owned and

should not be perceived as primarily reflecting the political interests of foreign countries.

- That there should be a certain level of “freedom” accessible to all, including women, but that this should be defined within an “Islamic framework.” There is a further implication, however—particularly among female respondents—that this framework needs to be more clearly defined to prevent it from falling prey to extremist, uneducated interpretations.
- That elections, along with the institution of parliament (and to a lesser degree, the PCs), are considered to be important and necessary as a step toward inclusivity. They are not considered a foreign import, but are perceived as susceptible to fraud and foreign interference.

Evidently these key findings are problematic and leave many questions unanswered: the concept of an “Islamic framework” remains indistinct, and the crucial issue of the acceptable role of women in society is far from being resolved. And *how* these trends might be adopted into the formation of a government that truly reflects the will of the Afghan people is another question entirely. For now, however, it is necessary to keep these overarching themes in mind when considering another critical factor affecting the future of democratisation in Afghanistan: that of security and stability.

<sup>64</sup> Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, “Undermining Representative Governance: Afghanistan’s 2010 Parliamentary Election and its Alienating Impact” (Kabul: AREU, 2011).



## 5. Democracy, Security and Stability: A Problematic Relationship

Democracy is widely considered to be an inherently peaceful political system. This contention is often supported by the claim (widely made by the Clinton Administration in the early 1990s) that democracies do not go to war with one another, and thus, by extension, the more democracies there are, the more peaceful and productive the international world order will become.<sup>65</sup>

Many respondents from the first phase of this research—in which data was collected in relatively “secure” provinces—shared the main thrust of this viewpoint. They highlighted that Afghanistan could not be a democracy because democracies in other countries were peaceful and secure, as one community leader from urban Kabul explained:

*In the developed world democracy is implemented by the people and the governments. There are rights for the people, they can vote freely and independently. But in Afghanistan this is not the case. Here there is force and guns...The warlords forced the people to vote for them. If they don't vote for a particular warlord their life is in danger. This is what we see in Afghanistan in the name of democracy, this is a shame for democracy.*<sup>66</sup>

For respondents who viewed democracy as a positive but unattained or unachievable goal in Afghanistan (largely those in the first phase provinces and Nimroz), the “democracy” of developed countries was thus idealised as an “implementable,” conflict-free end-state. Evidently, there are varying degrees of conflict and, relatively speaking, the difference in levels of security and freedom to vote without intimidation or violence between Afghanistan and a Western democracy is considerable. That said, so-called

established democracies are very much still in the process of developing their systems, changing voting procedures, and arguing over the rights and duties associated with citizenship; the relationship between citizen and state is far from fixed or static in these countries.

Views of democracy as a peaceful political system do not always take into account the messiness and violence that can often accompany democratic transitions or democratisation. Post-election violence in Cote-D'Ivoire in 2010-11, alongside the violent suppression of peaceful civilian protests pushing for democracy in Egypt, Bahrain, Syria and Yemen in 2011, provide recent examples of this. In fact, certain scholars have questioned the assumption that promoting democracy would bring about peace for some time. They argue that while democratic nations may not fight each other as frequently as non-democratic ones, there is still no guarantee that they will not experience internal conflict.<sup>67</sup> One study in particular found that existing ethnic divides in young democracies can be emphasised to varying degrees by democratic institutions and apparatuses, such as political parties and particular electoral systems.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, it stressed that if economic trends follow ethnic fault lines, conflict between opposing groups can be emphasised in spite of (and even as a result of) the existence of these democratic institutions.<sup>69</sup>

Data collected in the second phase of this study—especially (as might be expected) in more insecure

67 Frances Stewart and Megan O'Sullivan, “Democracy, Conflict and Development—Three Cases” (Oxford: Queen Elizabeth House, 1998), <http://www3.qeh.ox.ac.uk/RePEc/qeh/qehwps/qehwps15.pdf> (accessed 14 August 2008).

68 Stewart and O'Sullivan, “Democracy, Conflict and Development,” comparing the cases of Uganda, Kenya and Sri Lanka.

69 For more on the relationship between ethnicity and conflict, see P. Collier, “The Political Economy of Ethnicity,” prepared for the annual World Bank Conference on Development Economics, 20-21 April 1998, <http://www.worldbank.org/html/rad/abcde/collier.pdf> (accessed 27 August 2008).

65 Anthony Lake “Dialogue: The Reach of Democracy; Tying Power to Diplomacy,” *New York Times*, 23 September 1994. <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/09/23/opinion/dialogue-the-reach-of-democracy-tying-power-to-diplomacy.html> (accessed 21 April 2011).

66 Cited in Larson, “Toward an Afghan Democracy,” 13.



areas of Ghazni and Nangarhar Provinces—pointed to a prioritisation of security above all else. The word “security” was used in different ways, to indicate both the need for *security from* the threat of attack from different groups, and *security to* rebuild the country, send children to school, or travel to work without fear of attack. Connections to “democracy” were complex: when the word was used in a negative sense, it was seen as a cause of insecurity, again linked to concepts of imperial imposition; when used in a positive sense, it was seen as something impossible to achieve without security. However, the data also conveys a deep-rooted concern about *instability* (of which insecurity is just one part) and the ways “democracy” could contribute to this. This concern was reflected primarily in views on regime change and the concept of multi-party competition. Finally, a generally preference was expressed across all respondents for a politics of consensus as opposed to majority rule. However, even while this is ostensibly (and claimed by respondents to be) more established as a mechanism for dispute resolution and the selection of leaders, it is also problematic in a number of ways and is not necessarily a universal guarantee of peace and stability.

## 5.1 Security from, security to...

The different ways the word “security” was used by respondents for this study varied according to their province, location and the levels of security they experienced. Generally speaking, the more insecure the area, the more significant focus was placed on “security from” airstrikes, night raids or intimidation from military forces (either government, international or insurgent). The following respondents from Ghazni talked at length about the lack of security from these kinds of incidents:

*The security situation in the region is very bad. There was a bomb blast in the Now Abad road and ten people died and five people were badly injured. Now people are very much afraid in the area. When I go to school I do not expect that I will return safely.*

– Female teacher, urban Ghazni

*Because of these bombs people are very tense, because so many innocent people are dying in the districts and small villages. The people are faced with different types of problems, and their lives are in danger. They are scared of the government, they are scared of thieves, they are scared of everyone...All the people of those areas are living in fear. Even the animals are scared and they are not eating anything. These are the security conditions.*

– Male nurse, urban Ghazni

*In a rural area of Ghazni Province there was a lady who was the head of the women’s shura. Some days ago some armed people went to her house and warned her that if she did not resign in 24 hours she would be responsible for her own death. Other people have similar stories, and also many times school students have received these kinds of warnings from different groups. They say, “you are leaving home dressed in black—we will send you home wearing white [funeral shrouds].” Because I am interested in going to school these threats will continue, along with even more warnings which are not appropriate to mention here. We students and myself especially request that the local government ensure the security of students as they travel to school, because this would encourage the students to have good intentions—for example to become a doctor or teacher in the future to serve our nation.*

– Female student, urban Ghazni

*There are threats to the people from the Taliban and also from ISAF. For example, at night, after nine at night, no one is allowed to leave his home, even if someone is sick and needs a doctor. If a person works with the government or an NGO, they are banned from doing this by the Taliban, who say that those people who work with NGOs or the government will be put to death. Some buildings in Qara Bagh District were under construction and the Taliban announced that anyone coming to work on the building would be shot.*

– Male teacher, rural Ghazni

These respondents talk about very basic or fundamental activities—such as leaving the house

after dark if necessary, getting medical attention for sick relatives, going to school or work each day, tending livestock—which are prevented or hindered by the threat of violence. These are evidently priorities, mentioned consistently in interviews in response to questions about the security situation in a respondent’s home area. Although people talked about security problems during elections which could prevent them from voting when asked specifically, no respondents highlighted elections of their own accord when asked about the security situation more generally. This could indicate that greater priorities exist, and on a daily basis. As examined above, the idea of elections is generally still considered a positive phenomenon, but participating politically is not currently a key area of concern.

The development of a political culture is unlikely as long as declaring one’s allegiances is something to be avoided at all costs for fear of violent repercussions.

Respondents in more secure areas—for example in a “safe” district of central Nangarhar—also used their day-to-day experiences as a measure when asked about security, but with substantially different results. As one wage labourer living in a suburb of Jalalabad city put it, “life is passing very well. When it is morning, everyone goes to his work; no one bothers us.” A shopkeeper in a rural village in a relatively secure district had a similar response: “I have a very simple shop. I am busy tending it, and I manage to find a living to support my children.” Although people expressed an awareness of insecurity in other areas, or on rare occasions, in general perspectives were positive:

*Security is comparatively better here than in other provinces. Some rare incidents happen, like bomb blasts and suicide attacks, which kill innocent people...The reason for these attacks is the weakness of the government. I blame those officials who are responsible for keeping security in the province. They don’t care about the security of the people and their responsibilities, therefore such bad incidents happen. Here*

*though the situation is fine, because everyone goes about his or her own business without the interference of others. Students go to universities and schools, those who have jobs continue their work and so on. Therefore, I can say that the general condition here is very dependable.*

— Female teacher, semi-urban Nangarhar

Clear from these responses is the running theme of people associating security with the freedom to go about daily activities without outside interference, whether from insurgent groups or the government. Indeed, a number of respondents talked about insecurity in other areas as the result of the government wanting to extend its control, and in the quotation above the government is blamed for an increase in insurgent attacks. This is not a new theme and reflects how since the reign of Amir Abdul Rahman in the 19th century, government interference in daily life (for example in extorting taxes, in conscription regulations or, as occurred during the later reign of King Amanullah, in the imposition of modern social values) has incited angry and often violent reactions from communities in different parts of the country.<sup>70</sup> However, there is at the same time a simultaneous and far reaching expectation of the government not only to provide services and enforce security but also to enact laws regulating social behaviour, local decision-making and the presence of international forces. The various, all-encompassing and at times contradictory demands people have of their government thus complicate the community-state relationship, adding a further challenge to the process of democratisation.

In Kabul, respondents made a clearer and more direct link between security and democracy, as summarised in the views of one male teacher:

*There should be an environment in which people can feel safe so that they can participate in elections and other political processes. Security is one of the pillars of democracy. To practice and strengthen democracy there should be first of all security.*

<sup>70</sup> Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 148, 184.

This perspective moves beyond the daily concerns and fears of those living in insecure areas in its focus on people feeling safe enough to participate in political processes—not a key priority for many study respondents given the current environment. It suggests that people need to be able to participate without fear of intimidation or violent consequence. Although Afghans have participated in elections over the last six years in spite of violent attacks and threats, they have done so in increasingly fewer numbers. As examined above, the threat of violence does not appear to alter the general view across all interviews that the *idea* of elections is positive; but it does severely affect people’s ability to prioritise participation above significantly more pressing concerns. Furthermore, as the respondent here indicates, this is not only about having enough security to participate in elections once every few years, but about instilling enough public confidence in the more general security situation to encourage interest and participation in “other political processes”—in other words, to develop a political culture. However, this cannot be established while declaring one’s political allegiances is something to be avoided at all costs for fear of violent repercussions.

## 5.2 Stability: The possibility of regime change and perceived threat of political competition

Whereas “security” has been interpreted above to signify *security from* violence or intimidation, and *security to* go about daily activities without interference, “stability” is used here to denote a broader sense of continuity and dependability in political, economic and social life. It signifies a situation in which the “rules of the game”—for example in credit transactions, marriage practices, or elections—are widely known and perceived to be constant. Instability, by contrast, suggests a context where such rules are perceived as unstable or fluid by those involved—essentially, where interactions become unpredictable.<sup>71</sup> From a short-

71 This distinction was also made in a previous AREU paper on elections. See Anna Larson, “The Wolesi Jirga in Flux, 2010: Elections and Instability I” (Kabul: AREU, 2010), 4.



*Police guard a polling centre in Kandahar during 2009’s presidential election (Photo: Canadian Embassy)*

term perspective, it is possible to see the effects of instability in recent elections, or in bargaining for MPs’ votes in plenary debates, for example. No actor is certain of their support bases and cannot trust the promises of candidates, voters or MPs because there is no incentive to play by the rules when nobody else is doing so. Seen in the longer-term, however, this definition of instability applies equally to the frequency of regime change in Afghanistan over the last century. As administrations have come and gone, they have introduced ostensibly different rules with varying degrees of enforcement. These have usually been applied in different ways to different people depending on the alignment of patronage networks and deal-making occurring at any given time.

It was only toward the end of PDPA rule in the late 1980s that President Najibullah began “reconciliation” (by renegeing on former revolutionary principles) with opposition groups.<sup>72</sup> The parallel between this situation and current attempts by the Afghan Government to offer peace packages to “upset brothers” or “moderate” Taliban is clear to many Afghans, some of whom are already anticipating the fall of the Karzai era.<sup>73</sup> This perspective is further strengthened by continued

72 Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 146-147.

73 Various interviews.



pronouncements in the West about the departure of foreign forces, and more generally by the inability of any Afghan regime over the past 40 years to survive more than a decade. Such changes were frequently remarked upon by study respondents. One male shopkeeper in rural Ghazni referred to this in terms of power or control being ephemeral:

*Power is something short-lived, it doesn't remain [in the hands of one group] forever. In the past 30 years I have seen so many governments change.*

Others talked about power being gained by force, and thus always being held by those with the upper hand militarily. This was certainly and visibly the case for many respondents in Ghazni, whose daily life is plagued by worries over which group of armed men—Taliban or ISAF—will enter their village next. In such circumstances, choosing sides can be difficult, as the following respondents explained:

*We feel afraid because from one side there is the Taliban and from the other, there are the foreign troops...If a person has a long beard then the government people will say that he belongs to Al Qaeda or the Taliban, and if he is clean shaven then the Taliban will say that he belongs to the government. In this respect we are worried about our life here in Ghazni.*

– Male farmer, rural Ghazni

*There are threats to the people from the Taliban and also from ISAF. When the Taliban come to our village or mosque, they order us to bring lunch or dinner and tea for them. The people of the area are compelled to do so. When the villagers have provided them with a meal, the Taliban leave and after they have gone ISAF and the national police come to bother and interrogate us. They accuse us of providing hospitality to Talibs and they search our homes, because they think we are hiding Taliban and that we work for them.*

– Male student, urban Ghazni

*In rural areas there is no security, and no-one feels safe—people fear for their own safety, for their children, their possessions, and they are scared of both the Taliban and the government. The government is telling them not to help the Taliban and the Taliban is telling them not*

*to take sides with the government or receive government assistance. So these people are wondering what to do. There is also the problem of foreigners, who are exploding bombs, and not allowing cars to pass their convoys. The poor population is being disturbed from every side.*

– Male community leader, rural Ghazni

The lack of stability described by respondents is clear: different, opposing and contradictory demands are being made by both sides, both of whom also have considerable force at their disposal to consolidate their hold on the area. According to this research (which is not representative of Ghazni Province as a whole) the Taliban do not command widespread public support—in a number of interviews, respondents described how some Taliban were unable to speak either Dari or Pashto, thus appearing almost as foreign as the ISAF forces. However, the Taliban's rhetoric of religious and moral superiority over their Western opponents, their potential "staying power," and the brute force and threats of punishment for disloyalty they bring to bear are currently able to trump foreign promises of "democracy"—which is not in itself associated by respondents with the prospect of a more stable regime.

This is inherently significant to the potential future of democratisation in Afghanistan, highlighting two clear lessons. Deteriorating security and a corresponding increase in the presence of foreign troops (especially when there is no clear evidence of the public in the benefit of their presence there) serves to emphasise and entrench negative views of "democracy" as an imposition from outside and contrary to the principles of Islam. Secondly, foreign presence not only provides the Taliban with a further rhetorical platform, but—in the context of an awareness of their impending withdrawal—drives people into siding with the entirely anti-democratic forces of radical Islamist groups.

One of the ways in which the desire for stability presented itself in data across all study provinces was importance people ascribed to building "national unity," and, in doing so, avoiding a competitive politics that might further jeopardise the stability

of the nation. This was particularly evident in how they saw political parties; especially in the second phase of research, these were viewed as vehicles for the destruction of the country:

*Parties and groups are not good for our people. Disunity, wars and problems are created by these parties and have been created in the past. In our area there are two groups, one is Hizb-i-Islami and the other is Harakat. There was an issue between two families, one of which belonged to Hizb-i-Islami and the other belonged to Harakat. Both sides had weapons and they were supported by their parties. They fired at each other and caused the deaths of several people. In the end one family moved to another area but the enmity still exists. The situation was caused by the parties who gave weapons to these families and supported them.*

– Male student, urban Ghazni

*Political parties are not good in Afghanistan because they create differences in the local area. In the past the parties fought among themselves and many Afghans were killed in their wars.*

– Male taxi driver, urban Ghazni

*Political parties are a big disturbance for the development and rebuilding of Afghanistan... [T]hey destroyed Afghanistan and divided the country into pieces, so according to my opinion these parties are not good. I wish that their elders would become united and choose one person among them who can work for Afghanistan and help it to stand on its own feet.*

– Male elder, rural Ghazni

*All political parties have a priority to generate high-level positions for themselves and they do not serve the people. They only think about their personal interests and they promote ethnic discrimination.*

– Male taxi driver, urban Nimroz

*All the parties are fake parties and they exist for the destruction of Afghanistan, not for reconstruction. Just look at how they destroyed the whole of Kabul.*

– Male villager, semi-urban Nangarhar

*Political parties should not be given so much power that they can harm the government's activities.*

– Male computer repairman, urban Nangarhar

*And we should all unite together and share our sorrow and joy with each other. We shouldn't be divided into different races, religions, parties or groups; then we can make a real and strong government; otherwise it is impossible.*

– Female village representative in local *shura*, rural Nangarhar

It has often been said that parties have a negative reputation in Afghanistan on account of the atrocities committed during the 1990s, for example in the civil war. However, there appears to be more to this narrative. Parties have had a troubled history in Afghanistan extending back to the mid-20th century, which explains in part why many Afghans consider them to represent an extreme, conflictual politics: throughout the country's history, they have been consistently sidelined by leaders concerned about the rise of an opposition. Only officially allowed to register for the first time in 2003, their development as political players remains tightly restricted. As such, parties developed on the fringes as clandestine organisations within Afghanistan or factions based in Pakistan or Iran,<sup>74</sup> and were prone to the espousment of radical agendas. As a consequence, they are often associated with communists on the one hand, or the religious fundamentalism of the Islamist mujahiddin on the other.<sup>75</sup> The consistent marginalisation of parties by successive governments in Afghanistan has prevented the development of moderate, policy-driven parties and has contributed to the way in which they have become associated by Afghans with violent opposition and instability.

74 International Crisis Group (ICG), “Political Parties in Afghanistan” (Kabul and Brussels: ICG, 2005), 1,2,13, [http://www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/B039\\_political\\_parties\\_in\\_afghanistan.ashx](http://www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/B039_political_parties_in_afghanistan.ashx) (accessed 21 April, 2011).

75 ICG, “Political Parties in Afghanistan,” 11. For more on the development and history of Afghanistan's political parties, and their categorisation into different ideological groups, see Thomas Ruttig, “Islamists, Leftists and a Void in the Centre: Afghanistan's Political Parties and Where They Came From 1902-2006” (Kabul: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2006).





Campaign posters crowd street furniture in Mazar-i-Sharif, 2010 (AREU file photo)

However, in statements about political parties, the problems raised appear to refer to broader concerns about the very principle of political competition, and many respondents appeared genuinely concerned about the idea of competition between parties or groups in general. This is due in part to the legacy of conflict in Afghanistan, and the way threatened or actual violence has been used as a tool of political negotiation. This is also reflected in perspectives on regular stand-offs in parliament between the government and different groups who would now classify themselves as in opposition. When respondents in a related AREU project on parliamentary elections talked about the rise of the so-called “opposition,” an overwhelming number stressed the need for reconciliation between the two groups in order to produce an effective, unified

government.<sup>76</sup> They also expressed considerable concern about the possible ethnic implications of opposition, fearing that further conflict in parliament could ultimately produce a Pashtun-dominated pro-Karzai bloc set against a largely Tajik opposition.

This aversion to competition is problematic in many ways, not least because political competition forms one of the central components of any definition of democratic politics. Some scholars have argued that the uncertainty arising from the competition between groups or individuals is institutionalised by democratic elections—indeed, that elections are held in order to promote uncertainty—and that “democratisation is a process of subjecting all interests to competition.”<sup>77</sup> Although the way elections currently take place in Afghanistan does not create a level playing field for all candidates, the ideal scenario within a democratisation agenda is that at some point, a certain level of fair competition is reached.<sup>78</sup> While this may seem to go against the overall distaste for competition expressed by many respondents, it is perhaps the distinct lack of experience of perceived “fair” competition that generates respondents’ concern in the first place. The tensions between competition and stability are, however, evident in this discussion, and were further emphasised by respondents in a general stated preference for a politics of consensus.

### 5.3 A politics of consensus: Preferred but problematic

Competitive party politics—or indeed competition more generally—was not viewed in a positive light by respondents, primarily as a result of its ability to create tension and enhance instability. By contrast, a politics of consensus—whether embodied in the institutions of *shura* or *jirgas*, or in elders or

76 See Coburn and Larson, “Undermining Representative Governance.”

77 Adam Przeworski, “Democracy as a Contingent Outcome of Conflicts,” in *Constitutionalism and Democracy*, eds. Jon Elster and Rune Slagstad (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 68.

78 Larson, “The Wolesi Jirga in Flux,” 10.

respected local authorities—was widely seen to be a reliable, more “traditional” (and thus predictable) and stable method of decision making. It was also seen to be a method of dispute resolution in which the potential for conflict was minimised:

*Leaders, elders and scholars gather together and they talk about problems and analyse them to find the solutions. In Pashtun areas this is the most important way of solving problems, through a jirga...Most of the decision-makers are already local leaders and they are selected by the will of the people. People are ready to accept any decision they make. They are always ready to deal with the people’s problems and they are never slow to take action about a problem.*

– Male former government worker, semi-urban Nangarhar

*Members of the village shura make decisions because they are representatives of the people. People conduct a meeting among themselves to decide who to elect as the shura members, and then they make a decision...This is a good way of solving problems because our elders talk to each other and advise each other on how to solve a problem. This way the problems never have to be taken to the government.*

– Male teacher, rural Nimroz

*All the members of the village gather and they are asked which person they would agree upon to be our leader. Then the people form two or three separate smaller groups and they nominate one person per group. The one who has the most supporters is selected as the leader of the village...in selecting leaders in this way, we ensure that there is no one better qualified to solve the problems of the village.*

– Female student, semi-urban Nangarhar

*Elders and local chiefs gather in a specific location and they hear the perspectives of the two opposing sides, and after that they make a decision. Anyone who does not honour the decision is bound to pay a cash fine.*

– Male computer repairman, urban Nangarhar

The prevalence of this perspective is not wholly surprising given that variants of the consensus model have been used in some communities for many

generations. Indeed, this approach has been part of decision-making practices in the Muslim world for centuries—before even the advent of Islam—and thus has strong roots in Afghan social practice.<sup>79</sup> In general, practices of decision-making across the country are fairly similar and rely heavily on a politics of consensus, in which elected or selected leaders come together to discuss an issue until an agreement is reached. Respondents for this study almost universally viewed this system of problem-solving as representative and satisfactory.

Having said this, the practice of decision-making by consensus is not necessarily a guaranteed solution to instability and unrest. Indeed, with power unilaterally vested in the hands of a group of decision-makers and no formal mechanism to remove them should the need arise, the issue of *who* makes up this group is all the more important:

*Sometimes there can be problems, for example when a leader takes the aid money donated to the village and distributes it only among the widows and orphans that he knows rather than equally across the village.*

– Female student, semi-urban Nangarhar

*The decision-makers in our village are local chiefs and elders that are all involved in bribery and other kinds of corruption. They decide about those issues which are useful for them. They just think and work for themselves. They don’t care about the people and their problems. Most of the elders and maliks [village heads] are uneducated people; therefore sometimes they make the wrong decisions. We don’t know what the future will be for us and our society...They make all the decisions to their own advantage. They don’t have any specific standards and principles for the decision-making process. They cannot solve problems correctly, because they are illiterate and don’t have awareness of Islam. They always try to expose others’ negative points, but don’t think about their own wrong-doing. They always make minor problems very big, for example like the crisis of Palestine.*

79 Keane, *Life and Death*, 126-55.

**Question:** *Who are these decision-makers selected by?*

**Answer:** *They have become our leaders and elders by their own power and relations to higher authorities...They have a large number of relatives and supporters, therefore they are governing the village.*

– Male teacher, semi-urban Nangarhar

It appears that while decision-making by consensus—sometimes labelled “assembly democracy”<sup>80</sup> by scholars—is an ostensible way of preventing conflict, it can be used to bolster existing powerholders and exclude those outside their family or patronage networks. In more recent years (for example as a result of the violent removal of traditional elders during the Soviet regime), positions of leadership have been forcibly taken by military commanders or strongmen, whose legitimacy among local communities is questionable.

Questions of how to “scale up” consensus politics also present a major challenge. While fines or community pressure can ensure that opposing parties comply with decisions made by community *shuras* at a local level, these mechanisms cannot provide the same guarantee when it comes to national politics. Different religious and ethnic groups may consider compromises made by leaders in the name of consensus as a dangerous strategy of interaction with other groups whose agendas they do not trust. This was certainly the case in 2006, when Hazara leader Mohammad Mohaaqqeq’s decision to align with Abdul Rasoul Sayyaf—a long-standing enemy of many within the Hazara group—led to the alienation of a number of Mohaaqqeq’s supporters.<sup>81</sup> The likelihood of this kind of alienation taking place is even greater given that very few if any mechanisms exist to promote the downward accountability of leaders to their group members.

These pitfalls suggest that the legitimacy and efficacy of consensus-based dispute resolution mechanisms

<sup>80</sup> Keane, *Life and Death*, xv.

<sup>81</sup> Niamatullah Ibrahim, “The Dissipation of Political Capital Among Afghanistan’s Hazaras: 2001-2009” (London: London School of Economics Crisis States Research Centre, 2009), 12-13.

are not quite as clear-cut as they initially appear. Nevertheless, they are often romanticised by international actors who have sought to engage with local *shuras* in a number of development contexts, or in some cases attempted to create new *shuras* assigned to a particular project.<sup>82</sup> This is possibly a result of the relative success of the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) model, which other actors have sought to emulate. However, such efforts also form part of a broader effort by international actors since the beginning of the Bonn Process to combine “traditional” methods of decision making with liberal democratic institutions. Examples include the convening of the Emergency and then Constitutional *loya jirgas* (grand councils), and in the inclusion of a *loya jirga* in the Afghan constitution as the only means through which the constitution could be amended. This attempted combination of “old” and “new” practices has previously been noted as problematic by commentators—to the extent that one observer of the Afghan parliament elected in 1969 considered the merging of these traditions a critical hindrance to the efficacy of the legislature as a decision-making body:

*In essence the jirgah practice rests on informality, equality, and free expression, the very qualities that tend, if uncontrolled, to sap legislative effectiveness. Indeed, the cardinal defect of the Afghan parliament, more notably the lower house, is the refusal of legislators to relinquish the spirit of the tribal jirgah.*<sup>83</sup>

In essence, a confused mixture of both old and new practices has emerged, in which institutions appear superficially aligned with the constructs of liberal democracy but function on a day to day basis according to an entirely different set of rules. Furthermore, the “traditional” quality of the *loya jirga* in particular as an Afghan institution is also questionable. As Thomas Barfield notes, the practice of using *loya jirgas* to select leaders

<sup>82</sup> Shahmahmood Miakhel and Noah Coburn (2010) ‘Many Shuras Do Not a Government Make: International Community Engagement with Local Councils in Afghanistan’ (Washington, DC: United States Institute for Peace, 2010), <http://www.usip.org/publications/many-shuras-do-not-government-make-international-community-engagement-local-councils-in-af> 1 (accessed 21 April, 2010).

<sup>83</sup> Marvin Weinbaum, “Afghanistan’s Non-party Parliamentary Democracy,” *Journal of Developing Areas* 7, no. 3 (1972), 64.



or ratify policies links back only to a handful of examples in the last century, and even on these occasions the meetings were used more as a rubber stamp to confirm executive decisions than as truly consultative processes.<sup>84</sup>

Another key issue with the promotion of a politics of consensus is that it seems ostensibly at odds with the simultaneous promotion of competitive elections in which majority rule is a defining principle. However, as described above, this fundamental difference does not seem to have been too problematic in practice, and elections have been accepted by many communities at the local level as legitimate means through which to select representatives. This is the case because, for the most part, voting is still a community affair in which candidates are selected according to local consensus and then bloc votes given.<sup>85</sup> Different respondents described the benefits of this process and how it coincides with a politics of consensus:

*In my opinion, we can establish government and sovereignty when the local people are voting for their choice of candidate. Elders of the tribes, local shuras and village representatives gather together before election time and they choose a person who can work for the promotion and development of the country, keeping in mind Afghan culture and traditions. We are Afghan and we should not forget our culture and traditions...Every tribe must elect a person who is educated, professional and respected by the people. This person should be elected with the help of the village shura.*

– Housewife and home-shopkeeper,  
urban Nangarhar

*Elections are very good. I am illiterate and I haven't studied the Holy Qur'an but I know that if someone has grabbed a seat by force or power, elections can remove him from that seat. Elections are very good because there is no bloodshed. In the past, during the life of the Prophet, elders were selected through council*

*and consultation. Now also we should do things the same way and vote to select our leaders.*

– Male villager, rural Nangarhar

*It is good that decision-makers are chosen by the people and the people's difficulties are solved by them. From another perspective, Islam commands us to discuss all issues together. Consultation is an important principle of our religion.*

– Female PC member, urban Nangarhar

As the respondent in the first quotation implies, the concept of electing representative “with the help of the village *shura*,” or through bloc voting, is at odds with the Western democratic principle of “one man, one vote.” Indeed, the concept of bloc voting does not sit comfortably with the ideal of individual rational choice and the tenets of liberal democracy, in which every citizen has the right to vote according to his or her own individual persuasion. As one female student from Kabul pointed out,

*Afghanistan is a type of collective society rather than an individualistic one; here there are tribes, ethnicities, religious groups, and regional or village systems. The people act according to whatever is told to them by their leaders or clans. But one of the principles of democracy is that every individual who has wisdom is free.*

Evidently, there is a tension here between the will of the community and that of the individual. Nevertheless, it is arguable that the way bloc voting occurs in Afghanistan is no less “rational” for an individual than the prospect of making a lone decision. This is firstly because it could be very much within the individual’s personal interest to ensure a candidate from his community is successful, and secondly because this is a false distinction anyway: in liberal democracies, bloc voting through mechanisms such as lobbying or labour unions are common practice. The quotations above describe how the principles of “assembly democracy” and “representative democracy” are combined in a practical manifestation by Afghans claiming ownership of elections and participating in them through their own established mechanisms of decision-making.

84 Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 295.

85 Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, “Voting Together: Why Afghanistan’s 2009 Elections were (and were not) a Disaster” (Kabul: AREU, 2009).

This said, the key issue with bloc voting in Afghanistan is not so much that it is in some way undemocratic, but that some communities are more able to organise effectively than others, and thus become better represented in decision-making institutions.<sup>86</sup> This has been notably the case in Ghazni, where in the 2010 parliamentary elections all eleven of the province's allocated seats for the *Wolesi Jirga* were won by Hazara candidates. This created significant concern at the highest levels in the Afghan government and among international policymakers, some of whom at the time suggested coming to a "political solution" (i.e. by somehow changing the results in favour of Pashtun candidates in order to avoid civil conflict) as opposed to a legal one.<sup>87</sup> This reaction alone illustrates how the politics of consensus can end up highly problematic when scaled up to a national level, and is not necessarily the source of peaceful dispute resolution it is often portrayed to be.

## 5.4 Section summary

This section has explored the ways in which democracy, security and stability are discussed and indirectly related to one another by respondents. It has discussed the different ways respondents define security and how this is reflected in their priorities. For inhabitants of insecure areas, the ability to undertake everyday activities is a far higher priority than participating in political processes, while even in more secure areas, the concern with being able to go about one's own life without being hindered or harassed by others or the government appears paramount. It has also highlighted how respondents' views on their relationship with the state are complex and sometimes contradictory, combining expectations of service provision with a desire to be left alone.

<sup>86</sup> For more on bloc voting, see Coburn and Larson, "Voting Together."

<sup>87</sup> Thomas Ruttig, "2010 Election (39): Ghazni's Election Drama - It's the System," Afghanistan Analysts Network, <http://aan-afghanistan.com/index.asp?id=1361> (accessed 10 December 2010). After some delay the Independent Election Commission (IEC) announced its acceptance of the initial results and (to date) this has not been formally challenged.

In spite of high levels of insecurity in some areas, there is nevertheless still a positive view of the idea of elections, although this did not translate into an increased turnout for the parliamentary elections in 2010. It is also significant that elections in themselves do not appear to be tarnished with the same brush of imperial imposition as "democracy," and continue to inspire the prospect of participation—even if the likelihood of being able to do so in an insecure environment is minimal. However, insecurity is a key barrier to the development of a political culture in which people might participate in (and consider important) "other political processes," critical to the process of "democratisation" in the most rudimentary sense of the word. Expanding a focus on insecurity to one of more general instability, it is clear that a politics of competition—as inherent in modern, liberal democracy—is seen by respondents to promote instability rather than channel it into positive, political rivalry. In addition, the consistent marginalisation of political parties by successive governments in Afghanistan has prevented the growth of moderate parties and has contributed to their association by Afghans with violent opposition.

Finally, this section has discussed the problematic nature of a politics of consensus. While this is considered by many respondents to be the most appropriate means of decision-making as a result of its familiarity, tendency to generate peaceful solutions and avoid conflict, it remains highly problematic in its propensity toward elite capture and the promotion of unequal representation. Although the merging of decision-making by consensus with the liberal democratic model of individual votes has been successful for some communities, it has contributed to the marginalisation of others.

The following key points can be determined from the data presented in this section:

- Respondents living in unstable areas do not prioritise participation in elections or other political processes above the need to go about everyday activities without being harassed or threatened with violence by the insurgents or



state actors. The lack of security is a critical barrier to the development of an inclusive and participatory political culture.

- In spite of this, the *idea* of elections is still considered positive by an overwhelming majority of respondents from all social backgrounds and all provinces studied.
- Instability more generally is of critical concern to respondents, who discuss the need for consistency and reliability in contrast to the frequent regime changes of recent history. Political competition generally, and parties more specifically, are seen in a negative light as factors contributing to instability.
- A politics of consensus is commonplace, familiar and accepted by many respondents as a legitimate and peaceful means of decision-making. It is frequently incorporated into elections, which are often adapted from a “one man, one vote” principle to a system of bloc voting. However, this can be problematic as it facilitates greater (and often disproportionate) representation of those communities better able to generate widespread consensus.
- Security in the short-term and stability in the long-term are crucial precursors of democratisation in Afghanistan.

## 6. Democracy as the Ultimate Equaliser

Modern, liberal democracy is widely considered an equalising force: where universal suffrage is present, all citizens' votes count for the same, and anyone may stand for election in spite of their status, wealth or family heritage. However, study respondents raised a number of concerns with applying this ideal in the Afghan context. The first is that in a largely illiterate society, this equalising force might not necessarily result in a "capable" government, since—according to elite perspectives—people in rural areas might not know who to vote for. The second, contradictorily, is that while equality would be a positive development, it is not achievable as long as those with money and power in government determine the rules of the game. The third concern relates to narratives of inclusion and exclusion. Many respondents offered competing opinions on the merits of equal versus proportional representation, while some described an ideal state of *perakh bansat* (complete representation or inclusion), in which all groups are represented, and yet no one group is strong enough to exert pressure on another.

### 6.1 Problems with equality in candidacy and voting

A number of urban respondents in the study's first phase expressed a degree of concern about the equalising nature of democracy in a context of widespread illiteracy. According to the principles of universal suffrage, the votes of those who cannot read or write count just as much as the votes of the educated. However, this opens up a strong possibility that outcomes of elections could be affected by local powerholders using coercion or force to gain the votes of illiterate communities. This concern presented a considerable dilemma for some respondents, especially in Kabul, who saw the manipulation of illiterate voters as a way for commanders and strongmen to gain seats in parliament. However, this elitist perspective is not substantiated in the data. Instead, it appears that while illiterate communities do often vote in

groups (as mentioned above), group voting can be rational, organised and less open to influence by local commanders than urban elites might think. Furthermore, the perception that bribery, vote-buying and intimidation only occur in rural areas among illiterate communities is simply false: AREU research on the elections in 2009 and 2010 found a number of instances of these taking place in urban areas as well.<sup>88</sup>

The concept of universal suffrage also points to another issue: that of women's participation. Although communities in extremely conservative areas were not included as part of this study, largely due to inaccessibility, the research gathered a variety of perspectives which included many conservative viewpoints on the role of women. However, even among these respondents the prospect of either women voting or women standing as candidates was not a matter of particular concern. In fact, there was a considerable amount of support for female candidates among male respondents in both rural and urban Nangarhar. And while some women in Ghazni talked about not being allowed to vote due to their husbands' emphasis on "security concerns," a surprising number also related having participated in elections. These trends are not insignificant given previous exclusion of women from the public sphere.

Another concern of urban respondents regarding the equality of democratic politics centred around parliamentarians' eligibility for their positions. Many felt that candidates from rural communities would be unlikely to have the education necessary for their official posts, and that there should be some kind of minimum educational requirement in place to ensure that parliament was comprised of capable MPs.<sup>89</sup>

88 See for example Larson, "The Wolesi Jirga in Flux," 17-19.

89 According to the 2010 presidential decree on the electoral law, there are in fact now educational requirements for PC and district council candidates, but not, strangely, for *Wolesi Jirga* or Presidential candidates. See *Afghanistan Electoral Law (Official Gazette no. 1012)*, 2010 (SY 1389).

*In my opinion, there are people in parliament who have very few qualifications, but they still hold parliamentary seats. There is no one to question whether they have the necessary education or skills...MPs should hold at least a bachelors degree, because if a person doesn't know anything himself, how will others benefit from him?*

– Female student, semi-urban Nangarhar

*I think there should be some standards for the candidates for the parliament. The MPs should not have blood on their hands and they should have a good education...[At present] anyone can stand for the elections, there aren't any standards and no one can stop anyone from becoming a candidate.*

– Male villager, semi-urban Nangarhar

*There are too many candidates and there is no role and limitation for the candidates. Last night I watched TV and it was said that some of the candidates are illiterate. A lady had just registered to run in the election, but she was illiterate. There should be controls and limitations for representatives. Merits, ability, social recognition and education should be a must for the candidates. Those people who have shown their ability and merits, and gained the people's trust, they can put themselves forward as candidates.*

– Male shopkeeper, urban Kabul

*Our country has been seriously affected by conflict, and because of this most people are uneducated. People in power do not have enough education and often positions are not given to competent people...It would be better if people with ability and education became powerful...Also some of the MPs are uneducated—some of them can't talk to the media and they sit like guests in parliament with nothing to say. They don't have any awareness about the law and law-making processes, and this causes some problems in parliament.*

– Male PC member, urban Nimroz

Evidently, however, this presents a problem in terms of the nature of democratic representation. While the desire to see a capable parliament comprised

of educated MPs is understandable, imposing educational requirements for candidates would leave even more communities across Afghanistan without representation. Technically speaking, it is more “democratic” to increase representation rather than limit it to the educated elite (although it was limited to male citizens in many countries until relatively recently). Another point of contention of course is the value placed here by urban respondents on formal education, making the assumption that a masters degree, for example, will automatically translate into the ability to represent and legislate. The question of formal education also brings in a demographic dimension in terms of the average age of candidates. Since further education institutions suffered greatly during the war years, there was a gap in the availability of education, meaning that a significant proportion of middle-aged men and women missed out on a university education unless they were able to go abroad to study. The majority of those with bachelors and masters degrees are thus either over 50 or under 25, the latter ineligible for candidacy in any case on account of their age. Most significant, however, is the fact that availability of educational services has always been heavily biased toward urban areas, contributing further to the split between the ruling urban elite and the rural population.

A final problem on the theme of equality expressed frequently by MPs and PC members relates more specifically the nature of Afghanistan's single non-transferrable vote (SNTV) system. In a conference for political parties and their leaders organised in August 2010, an influential party leader took the opportunity to criticise how, under this system, a person gaining 50,000 votes in the parliamentary elections was treated the same way as a candidate with 1,500 (both were enough to win one of the 33 parliamentary seats for Kabul Province in 2005).<sup>90</sup> The outcome has been a parliament in which key party leaders, school teachers, journalists, commanders and district strongmen are thrown together under the same title, even if in reality their levels of personal influence on parliamentary

<sup>90</sup> Author's observations, National Democratic Institute graduation for political party trainers, 5 August 2010. This complaint formed part of the speech of a key party leader.

proceedings are very different. This has resulted in a number of “mid-level” MPs becoming significantly disgruntled at decisions made by party leaders on their behalf, since they feel they should officially have the ability to make such decisions for themselves.<sup>91</sup> For these mid-level MPs—and respondents for this study, as discussed below—it appears that whatever other concerns they may have about the equalising nature of democracy, a desire for equality in resource distribution and access to decision-making remains key.

## 6.2 Some are more equal than others: Equality not delivered, even if desired

For many, there is thus a fundamental problem with the equalising nature of a democratic politics in terms of representation—who is able to vote, who can stand as a candidate, and fundamentally, what representation should actually comprise. However, this exists side by side with a contrasting desire for equality in access to political decision-making, service provision and resources. The need for greater political and economic equality was particularly notable in transcripts from Nimroz, possibly as a result of its remoteness from the centre:

*The implementation of democracy is currently not good in Afghanistan because our people in Nimroz are uneducated and poverty has increased. For this reason democracy doesn't have any meaning here...If people were able to be free of oppression and cruelty and defend their rights, then real democracy would be implemented.*

— Male head of NSP *shura*, semi-urban Nimroz

*There is a big gap between the people and the government, which is getting bigger each day. When someone goes to a government office, it takes weeks for him to finish his work there—but if they give money to the government officials, they can finish their work in an hour. This is why*

*there is an increasing gap between the people and the government.*

— Male 11th grade student, rural Nimroz

*I think that the MPs of our province are weak and do nothing for the people of the province. After they were successful in the elections they didn't come back to the province to ask about the problems of the people. We don't have electricity to see what goes on in parliament, but we see clearly with our own eyes that they do nothing for us here...If the MPs were not weak, why would the budget that was allocated for Nimroz be spent on Badakhshan instead? Why was the one million dollars allocated for our province stolen by unknown people?<sup>92</sup>*

— Female teacher, rural Nimroz

This sense of being left out or excluded from the benefits that a democratic political system might bring to others is not limited to Nimroz, and was apparent in interviews from all provinces across both phases of the study. Particular issues vary across provinces: in Parwan and Nimroz, trends focus on the lack of electricity and drinking water; in Nangarhar, administrative corruption features more strongly; and in Ghazni, the lack of security. However, these separate complaints were all framed by a critical lack of trust in the institutions of power, unhappiness with the lack of a level playing field, and a sense that the rich determine the rules of the game. Even when communities do manage to elect representatives to parliament, there is a clear perception that accountability of these representatives toward their constituents is missing, and that anyone who is voted in will work exclusively for their own benefit:

*The parliament of Afghanistan hasn't worked according to the people's demands. They only think about how they can get a high salary and a house from the state, and they don't think about poor people in Afghanistan.*

— Male teacher, rural Nimroz

*Which government? And what democracy? I can't call this situation democratic, there has*

91 M. Hassan Wafaey with Anna Larson, “The Wolesi Jirga in 2010: Pre-Election Politics and the Appearance of Opposition” (Kabul: AREU, 2010).

92 Numbers related here are emblematic rather than factually accurate.





The Wolesi Jirga in session (AREU file photo)

*been no growth of democracy, but instead the actions of the government and the MPs have defamed democracy. Now the people hate this type of democracy that has been demonstrated by the present government. Sixty-two million dollars were given for the electricity and power cables for our province but we don't know where this money has been spent...These government officials only try to cheat the people because their reports are completely opposite with what we see in practice.*

– Male manager of a cement factory, rural Parwan

*Democracy means freedom and every human being should be independent...but this freedom is not present in the current government of Afghanistan because the rights of poor people are trampled underfoot by people with power and money. This will only change when the government reduces corruption and reduces ethnic discrimination. People can then live independently within the framework of Islam.*

– Male farmer, rural Nimroz

*In the current government, human rights are destroyed and there is no freedom of speech. The people in government make their own reality with money, they discriminate against different ethnicities and the powerful people abuse their power. This is why implementing democracy is difficult here.*

– Female student, urban Nimroz

*In Afghanistan there is no democracy, because those who have power are governing here. If the parliament makes a decision, the government does not care about it. We cannot say that we have democracy here—it is anarchy, because anyone who has a small position in the government can get away with any illegal activity without being questioned about it.*

– Male teacher, Nangarhar

*There is only so-called democracy in Afghanistan. It is like the lipstick of women, which looks beautiful but does not have any resistance against licking. It is the same with the structure of the government—it doesn't have*



*the ability to provide governance so how will it build and serve the country? Money comes from the foreign countries but the government has placed thieves inside the ministries who take the dollars and spend them on luxuries. Poor people are begging for a piece of bread and our officials are driving in the most expensive new cars they can find.*

– Male former government worker,  
semi-urban Nangarhar

In the second phase of the research especially, narratives of corruption, inefficiency and ethnic bias were clearly present across many interviews. This is possibly related to the timing of the research, which took place after the presidential elections in 2009 and Karzai's widely-publicised and controversial nomination of a new cabinet. Both of these events were surrounded by allegations of fraud and deal-making between leaders of ethnic groups.

### 6.3 Narratives of inclusion and exclusion: *Perakh bansat*

The claims of ethnic marginalisation made in the quotations above come from both Pashtun and Baluch respondents. These coincide with a more general narrative of Pashtun exclusion dating back to the favouring Northern Alliance personalities during the Bonn Process—something subsequent events such as the appointment of a largely Pashtun cabinet have done little to diminish (though there remain very few Baluch represented in government). Indeed, among these ethnic groups there appears also to be widespread interest in the idea of proportional—rather than equal—representation of ethnic groups in government, as traditionally Pashtun tribes have been thought to comprise the largest minority group in Afghanistan. As one Pashtun respondent from Nangarhar put it, “in fact, 80 percent of the population in Afghanistan are Pashtun.”<sup>93</sup> However, the fundamental flaw in this argument is that no accurate population statistics exist, for the very reason that the actual disclosure of ethnic proportions might be politically unsettling and further emphasise existing ethnic

divisions. Even if such statistics were to be collected in future it is unlikely that they would be accepted as “fact” by all groups, again as a result of a mistrust of government institutions and the agendas of powerholders within them.

However, this idea of a Pashtun majority government was contradicted by a number of respondents in Nangarhar. When describing an ideal government, they talked about “*perakh bansat*,” meaning united or “completely representative/inclusive” government. This term was used by respondents in an ironic reflection of the current government, which they thought excluded a number of groups that deserved more formal recognition. One male former government worker in Nangarhar explained the concept in some depth:

*Perakh bansat is like the wide wall with wide foundations. A perakh bansat government is where all the people have limited rights or power, so that they are represented but they are not able to inflict harm on another group. In the government of Daoud Khan, I worked in an office, and I went there to solve a problem, and the man in the office said I needed 800 Afs to solve it. I asked him where I should get the money from. I went to the head of the office, and he himself gave me the money. I gave it to the first official. Then the head of the office went to the first official and asked him for his money back, and sent this man to jail! This was a perakh bansat government.*

In the situation this respondent describes, everyone is treated equally and no one ethnic group is able to bend the rules to his own liking—in other words, everyone is equal under the law. It is interesting however that he chooses the government of Daoud Khan—who orchestrated a military coup against the king, installed himself as president of the republic, and imposed strict restrictions on political opposition to his rule—as an illustrative example.<sup>94</sup> Nevertheless, the perception that the current government (with which Daoud's regime is implicitly compared) encourages inequality and differential treatment was common to almost all respondents for this study. For many who were

93 FGD, male teacher, Nangarhar (city).

94 Rubin, *Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 75.

able to compare this with what they expected of a democratic politics, this was by far the greatest barrier to the implementation of “real” democracy in Afghanistan. Furthermore, the common view of the current government as made up of self-serving, power-hungry elites serves only to emphasise the great need for limitations to be enforced over executive control of state functions.

## 6.4 Section summary

Essentially, then, people hold complex and often contradictory views on what democratic equality in Afghanistan should look like. On the one hand, equality in suffrage or candidacy is not desirable for many in the educated elite due to the perceived inequalities of education and understanding that currently exist in Afghan society. This leads to the suggestion from many respondents that there should be educational criteria placed on candidacy to reduce the likelihood of “unqualified” MPs being selected. However, this perspective makes problematic assumptions about the nature of representation, and especially the ability of “uneducated” communities to make rational decisions about their political needs. On the other hand, equality in resource distribution among ethnicities, interest groups and geographical areas is strongly desired by almost all respondents but considered distinctly lacking at present due to the influence of powerholders and a lack of transparency. The perceived discrepancies between

groups and the ways some are seen to benefit more than others from the current government is considered by many to be the main barrier preventing democratisation and stability. Equality in resource distribution, then—and in access to decision-making power regardless of wealth, power and patronage—is for many a prerequisite of a truly democratic society. A summary of key points from this section suggests:

- That equality in representation—in how constituents are represented and by whom—is not universally agreed or accepted, and serves to emphasise strongly the discourse of an urban-rural divide
- That equality in access to decision-making, service provision and resources is seen almost universally as a desirable outcome of the political system, partly due to the lack of such equality experienced by many respondents at present. The lack of transparency and accountability within the system serves to entrench a deep distrust in Afghanistan’s so-called democratic institutions.
- That at present, “democracy” is seen by many as a front or smokescreen behind which some groups and individuals are able to consolidate their influence and capture resources.
- That given these flaws, “democracy” in Afghanistan is not currently associated with a fair, transparent system in which all citizens have the same basic rights and opportunities.

## 7. Conclusions

### 7.1 Trends in the data: What do Afghans want from a political system?

The three principal categories or priorities that stand out throughout the data in all six provinces studied are ownership,<sup>95</sup> security and stability, and equality. It should be noted that all of the priorities raised by respondents in these three areas would be difficult principles to implement and integrate into a functioning democratic system in a secure environment. In a place where ongoing conflict threatens to undermine all trust in the current system and the term “democracy” has been widely stigmatised, the challenges of doing so are clearly multiplied. With this in mind, this section will attempt to summarise some of the main findings from this research in terms of respondents’ own priorities for the future of democratic institutions in Afghanistan.

#### *Ownership*

Reconciling Afghan “ownership” with the widely-held international perspective that enshrines liberal values as part and parcel of democratic institutions is evidently problematic. For many promoting democracy and democratisation in Afghanistan, it is not possible to separate “Western” and “Islamic” democracy. However, this paper argues that there is no way that democratic institutions will survive in Afghanistan unless their scope and remit are considered by Afghans to coincide with Islamic principles and a fundamentally national, Afghan character. The current narrative of imposition and outside interference is pervasive and damaging, and must be countered. Again, this is no simple matter; as the data above shows, there is little

consensus on what Islamic principles and “Afghan culture” actually constitute. Nevertheless, there are certain common themes across the perspectives gathered for this research—reflecting key concerns among Afghans from different locations and backgrounds—that must be addressed.

First, that Afghanistan’s political system should be established as its own, involving an actual and perceived decrease in the extent of foreign influence. This is highly problematic for a number of reasons, including Afghanistan’s aid-dependency and its 20th century history of reliance on deals with neighbouring and other countries to generate income. Furthermore, the kind of political system needed to facilitate the equal access to decision-making and resources desired by so many respondents for this study might not be one that has been implemented in Afghanistan before. Indeed, the concept of an equal citizenship in the country is—in certain respects at least—nothing short of revolutionary. This being the case, perhaps an entirely different, more devolved political system is unavoidable. While concerns about warlordism and the rise in influence of regional commanders prompted those involved in the Bonn Process to opt for a highly centralised system, this in itself promotes the patronage and power-grabbing that deny equal access to resources. For many, these contradictions remain undistinguished and need to be explored by Afghan intellectuals and decision-makers in more depth. Nevertheless, one way to improve a sense of ownership over the system as it currently stands would be to introduce more opportunities for public participation—in elections for governorship positions, for example, which are currently determined by presidential appointment.

The second issue of “ownership” emerging from the data concerns the stated distaste among respondents for “Western culture” and the potential threat it poses to “Afghan culture,” traditional norms or values and an Islamic identity. With the fall of the Taliban and introduction of “democracy” coinciding with an influx of media access and the return of

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<sup>95</sup> This term has not been used up to this point in this paper due to its vague connotations and the way in which it has become a “buzzword” of the development and international community in Afghanistan. It is used here reluctantly, in inverted commas, because it seems to summarise concerns about democracy as an imperial imposition quite well. Its limitations are however duly acknowledged.

many Afghans from diaspora communities in the West, it is unsurprising that the word is so widely linked with so-called “Western” values. Again, an urban-rural divide is emphasised here, in that Kabul City has traditionally been seen by non-Kabul residents as a centre for immorality and change. However, “Western values” are often mixed or used synonymously with the idea of modernisation; it is therefore difficult to determine which are rejected absolutely as un-Islamic, and which could be accepted given time and given the departure of foreign “imperialist” forces. It is also fundamentally a question of identity, of defining what kind of modern society is considered appropriate for Afghanistan, and of who Afghans in the 21st century perceive themselves to be. This of course varies enormously between young and old, rich and poor, male and female, urban and rural, across and within ethnicities—a fact that questions in itself the very concept of a single “Afghan” identity. And yet, strongly represented in the data is a sense of Afghan-ness and unity. As Thomas Barfield points out, in spite of the many differences dividing groups within Afghanistan, there is still a sense of “nation,”<sup>96</sup> and the argument that different ethnic groups need separate states is rarely heard.<sup>97</sup>

Finally, elections, along with the institution of parliament (and to a lesser degree, the PCs) are considered to be important and necessary as a step toward inclusivity in spite of fraud, insecurity and questions surrounding the principle of majority rule. They are not considered a foreign import, though they are perceived as susceptible to foreign interference. As such, any future elections must be accompanied by improvements in the accountability and transparency of procedures and processes. This is especially true in the aftermath of the parliamentary elections in 2010, which arguably caused serious damage to the process of democratisation in the country. Comparisons of the short-lived experience of Afghanistan’s last elected parliament in the 1960s with the current context currently offer an all too plausible vision

of the future, one where electoral infrastructure collapses while an increasingly overbearing executive takes the reins of government once again.

### *Security and stability*

One of the key messages stemming from this research is that it is not possible to establish meaningful democratisation without a basic level of security that allows people to hold differing views and express them without fear of harassment. This would seem an obvious observation, but it challenges the logic that suggests that democratisation processes can bring about security. In Afghanistan, democracy is not associated with security or stability because it has brought few improvements in these fundamental qualities over the last ten years. While international actors continue to use the rhetoric of democratisation, they are increasingly considered an imperial, invading force detached from the pursuit of peace. At the same time, powerholders within Afghanistan have also used democratisation as an opportunity to consolidate their hold on influence and resources, instilling a deep sense of distrust not only in these individuals but in the institutions that house them. Across the board there is a recognition among respondents that a democratic politics could in theory facilitate a more level playing field, but this is clearly an elusive prospect for most people in the current climate.

Furthermore, there is a widespread concern that political competition in the present environment will lead to more and not less instability. This is due to the nature of politics in Afghanistan, where the threat of violence is a viable, indeed a major, means through which to regain power and status. Nowhere is this concern more evident than in the widespread distrust of political parties. With time, this perception of competition as negative could be altered if parties are formally acknowledged as credible political actors and prove themselves as such. However, this would involve changes to the current political parties law and electoral system, alongside a willingness on the part of the president to accept political competition.

Finally, democratisation processes in Afghanistan need to be informed more substantively by the

96 Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 278.

97 Olivier Roy, “Afghanistan: Internal Politics and Socio-Economic Dynamics and Groupings” (Paris: UN Refugee Agency, 2002).



existing tension and overlap between individual preferences and a politics of consensus. It is argued in this paper that the use of bloc voting and decision-making by consensus have facilitated the uptake of democratic institutions such as elections in communities that otherwise might not adapt well to this latest set of institutional rules. Consensus allows these communities to adapt democratic elections to their own traditions and decision-making practices, and in doing so promotes the sustainability of the process. That said, this must be set against the risk that, in some communities, decision-making of this kind will be captured by a ruling elite and ultimately lead to a less representative system of governance.

### *Equality*

Currently, the term “Afghanisation” does not entail handing over decision-making power to all Afghans, but rather to the select few who have been able to consolidate their control over the institutions of government and governance. If “democracy” is to be associated with equality and equal access to resources, it is critical that the executive loosen its grip on parliament. This must coincide with a consistent upholding of the constitution, in which the rights of all male and female citizens are, at least in writing, guaranteed. The consolidation of power in the hands of a select few is by far the most notable grievance with the current government apparent in the data.

In general, universal suffrage is seen as a positive feature of the electoral system and this needs to be encouraged as far as possible, especially since it presents a relatively uncontroversial means to promote women’s access to the public sphere. In addition, there was a considerable desire expressed across educated, elite and rural respondents that those in power be educated enough to carry out their official duties. For some, a lack of trust in the general public’s ability to select appropriate candidates led to a call for educational requirements to be a feature of elections at all levels. While this would evidently be problematic in terms of the possibility of “ordinary people” being represented, it still highlights the imperative of compulsory, quality

education generally, alongside continuing civic education between elections. These must remain a focus of both the Afghan government and international community.

## **7.2 Concluding remarks and potential implications**

Findings from this study raise significant questions about the nature and trajectory of democratisation in Afghanistan. Firstly, they demonstrate the ambivalence pervading many Afghan perspectives on the term “democracy.” Secondly, they expose the significant gap between the rhetoric of would-be-democratisers on the one hand, and the experienced reality of corruption, patronage and intimidation on the other. Without assigning blame or attempting to pinpoint root causes of this discrepancy, the fact that such a gap exists, is expanding, and is widely recognised by Afghans represents a significant challenge for existing and future interventions designed to promote democracy in the country.

This is not to say that there is not room for the growth of a democratic politics in Afghanistan. Indeed, according to respondents for this study, there is considerable public support for greater levels of participation and more accountable government. Distinctly lacking, however, is the political will at the highest levels within the Afghan government to submit to public accountability, in part due to a legacy of paranoid leaders unwilling to accept the presence or development of opposition. After a decade of democratisation efforts, a culture of patronage and top-down executive resource distribution continues to prevail. In part, this has also been encouraged by a preference (however unavoidable) among international actors to deal directly with key personalities within the executive over members of elected legislative bodies. Worse, existing powerholders have coopted the language of “democracy” in their attempts to perpetuate this culture, using it to “legitimise” their otherwise arguably undemocratic behaviour. While there exist exceptions to this rule—such as the Independent Election Commission (IEC)’s decision to uphold the electoral law in Ghazni

Province’s deeply controversial parliamentary election process—there are nevertheless few incentives at present to push leaders at the top toward more accountable government.

The words “at present” are key here. Central to Tilly’s conception of democratisation as discussed in the introduction is its tendency to move back and forth along a continuum over time. It is also arguable that historical or religious factors do not in themselves preclude the furthering of a

democratic politics. In theory, then, there remains space for change. How and when this change occurs, however, will depend on the extent to which democratisation is seen as “Afghan” as opposed to imposed from outside, on shifting levels of security, and on how resources and access to power are distributed. None of these factors can be addressed in the short-term, however; thus combined, they point to a long and complex path ahead for Afghanistan’s nascent democratisation process.

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