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The Political Economy of Withdrawal and Transition in an Afghan Market Town

Noah Coburn

Afghanistan is at a crossroads. After nearly a dozen years of intervention, American troops are scheduled to depart in 2014, coinciding with elections for the first leader of Afghanistan after Hamid Karzai. Questions abound about whether the Afghan National Army (ANA) will be able to maintain security in parts of the country previously under the control of international forces. Will they be strong enough to maintain government-controlled territory? How will the decline of international funds shape the economy? As negotiations with the Taliban proceed, how will minority groups who were oppressed by the Taliban, but have done relatively well during the intervention, respond? Will the Taliban take part in upcoming elections? Will whoever replaces Karzai, assuming elections proceed as planned, be strong enough to hold the country together?

Key Points

While the international community focuses on national-level issues, many of the factors that will determine the future stability of Afghanistan are local.

Many local leaders have supported the Karzai regime because of the resources it has helped bring to communities. As funds decrease, it remains to be seen how these leaders will adapt to a shifting political economy.

If these local figures and their national-level counterparts do not see a reason to continue to support a parasitical, corrupt government, many of the gains of the past decade in Afghanistan could quickly be lost.

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While much attention has been paid to troop numbers and the handover to ANA forces,¹ less has been done to analyze how the transition will shape local political issues, both in those areas at the heart of the insurgency, but also those more on the margins, where communities have benefited more from the fragile growth of the Afghan economy and government. While negotiations with the Taliban certainly matter, it can be argued that the future of these areas may actually do much more to shape the fate of the country. A closer look at some of these issues suggests some reasons for optimism, particularly considering the gains that have been made in much of the country, but also some reasons for real concern.

Why the Local Matters

Currently much of the focus of analysts and reporters covering Afghanistan is on politics at the national and international level and certain issues such as Pakistan's ambivalent relationship with both the Taliban and the Karzai government. At the same time, however, any analysis that skips over the more local issues threatens to miss factors that are important both to average Afghans and possibly the future of the country.

One of the reasons why this is the case is the large number of local commanders, businessmen, and other influential local figures who have benefited from the current stability by tentatively supporting the Karzai government. Many of these local leaders have little personal loyalty to the national government, but have benefited economically either through international funds or less directly through the general economic growth of the past decade. As funds decrease it is questionable whether these leaders, especially those coming from ethnic minorities, will continue to support the government. If the fragile coalition formed around the Karzai government begins to break apart and loses the support of these local leaders, it will matter little if Karzai and the U.S. government are able to broker a deal with the Taliban.

At the same time, however, local leaders can do much to reshape the power base of the Taliban. Following the initial U.S. invasion in the fall of 2001, the Taliban were pushed out in a matter of weeks, not so much because of the force of the

American assault, but because local support for the Taliban evaporated almost overnight. Currently, for much of the country where the Taliban has been successful, it is either because they have the direct or tacit support of local communities. With international troops no longer spread across every province in the country, many of the insurgents driven by primarily local concerns may have fewer reasons to continue their fight.

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Thus, while there is much concern over what negotiations between pro-government supporters of Karzai and members of the Taliban may look like, and which of the little-changed list of national figures the negotiations will include, these national figures have for a good part remained relevant because they continue to convince enough local leaders at the district level that it is in their best interests to continue to support them. If these leaders, on either side, see their local interests changing significantly, the prospects for stability could change quickly too. But of course, assessing the interests of local leaders in thousands of Afghan villages and towns is a daunting task, so I will turn to one community which I know particularly well as an example.

Stability and Instability in a Market Town

From 2006 to 2008 I researched a small market town north of Kabul named Istalif, known in the area for its beautiful blue pottery. I focused particularly at how socio-political relationships in the town limited political and economic cooperation, but also encouraged stability and a measure of prosperity in the town. Of particular interest was how various power brokers, such as local elders, religious figures, merchants, former commanders, government officials, and interna-

tional NGOs, negotiated key local issues, for instance the construction of irrigation projects or the management of a local shrine, in a manner that reduced political tensions.²

Since then, much of my work has focused on other areas, but I have continued to return to the town a couple of times each year to meet with my local friends there and to try to keep abreast of local political developments. While my most recent trip in the summer of 2013 was not a research trip *per se*, some of the changes I noticed and the issues being discussed by my friends there raise some questions about the transition more broadly.

During the summer of 2013 the merchants in the area were continuing to do well and several new businesses in the town had opened, including a new restaurant for visitors on the banks of the river. Merchants, clearly influenced by Gulf culture, have also built new homes in the area and a handful of concrete mansions painted in pastel colors, often with reflective windows, clash strongly with the mud and stone architecture that is more typical in the area. As both merchants and commanders have prospered, many have used their wealth to build mosques in the area and, as one heads up the valley, there are several tidy new mosques dotting the landscape, many paid for by Istalifis who have not necessarily returned to the area, but are still working abroad and want to demonstrate their wealth and piety.

Most striking in terms of both the physical and the political landscape is the new district government headquarters. Five years ago in Istalif, it was common to see supplicants waiting to speak with the district governor sitting on narrow benches in the dark hallway of a half-bombed out building, which had previously been the Taliban headquarters in town. This building, however, now stands empty. On the opposite hillside, with a commanding view, is a new compound, heavily fortified and looking out ominously over the valley below. The base was built with foreign money and looks strikingly similar to both the American and Afghan army bases further down the valley. While the area remains peaceful and the guard towers appear empty, police checkpoints stop anyone without official business from drawing

too close. On my last visit the district governor was out of town and there was an eerie silence about the place that contrasted with the bustle of the old governor's headquarters, when petitioners had come and gone and where government officials chatted with local elders.

More encouragingly, several of the lower and middle-class shop-owners in the bazaar seemed to be doing well. One particularly poor weaver had set up a small shop, suggesting that not only the rich merchants were benefiting from the local economic growth. A set of brothers among the potters in town had also recently opened a new shop on the hillside above the bazaar, next to the local shrine. Particularly encouraging was that while shops in the lower bazaar cater in large part to the occasional international visitor who can be charged exorbitant prices, this particular shop close to the shrine and which is generally only visited by Afghans suggests a more local and sustainable economic growth.

It is clear that in recent years life has become better in Istalif. Electricity is now regularly available and many of my friends in the pottery community were discussing new plans for workshops, stores, or other business ventures. There is a tenuousness about all this, however. The presence of the state has clearly been reinforced with the help of international funds. But there are some reasons to be concerned about this development. Previously, the district governor's office was often spoken of as a generally unhelpful, but sometimes useful "outside force" in town. Town elders preferred to resolve disputes among themselves, but on occasion, the district governor could be a useful mediator.

The new district office suggests military strength, but it is unclear whether this will actually contribute to stability in the area or if it will threaten the local commanders, who have hitherto been quiet but still remain well-armed, even attracting insurgents. Some of the local commanders have reemerged from the shadows in recent years: one ran for parliament in 2010 and several have been involved in talks with other Northern Alliance leaders about which candidate they will campaign for in 2014.

While Istalif, which is primarily Tajik and relatively well-off, may not be a typical Afghan town (though it is hard to argue that in a country with such diversity that one could find a “typical” Afghan town), like much of Afghanistan outside of the south, it has been affected by the international presence to a certain degree, and many of the local concerns about the drawdown of troops are being echoed more nationally.

The Political Economy of Post-2014 Afghanistan

As businessmen and commanders in Istalif continue to negotiate the distribution of wealth generated in a large part by the international presence, so too will leaders across the country have to work to re-balance power as local economies shift with the decrease in international funds, much of which has been generated by the construction industry. It is difficult to predict the effect that this will have. The American ambassador to Afghanistan recently suggested that for many local Afghans aid has been delivered so ineffectively that there may be little change in what communities receive on the local level.³

Many of the youth in town have begun to grow resentful about the way in which the political elite have hoarded resources, widening the gap between rich and poor. Nationally, many of the jihad-era commanders have become enormously wealthy by moving into the security and construction businesses, supporting the international military coalition.

Such conclusions are misleading, however, since the intervention has had an indirect effect on almost all aspects of the economy. Several families of merchants in the Istalif bazaar have thrived as a result of these more open markets and trade, while everyone has benefited from the increase in goods and resources available, such as the local clinic. Many of the youth in town, however, have begun to grow resentful about the way in which the political elite have hoarded resources, widening the gap between rich and poor. Nationally, many of the jihad-era commanders have become enormously wealthy by moving into the security and construction busi-

nesses, supporting the international military coalition.

As troops leave and these contracts end, there are questions about how these individuals will continue to maintain their lifestyles, as well as their patronage networks, when suddenly there are fewer funds to distribute. In some cases, they may simply leave the country; indeed, money continues to leave Afghanistan as the wealthy fly to Dubai carrying large amounts of cash. In other cases, however, those that have been supported by international funds may turn to the opium trade or become increasingly involved with the growing numbers of gangs that run protection rackets and the highly profitable kidnapping industry which has grown up around Kabul.⁴

As funds decrease there is also the potential for political leaders to fall back on ethnic rhetoric to mobilize political support, particularly in the upcoming elections. Istalifis, who in good times have proudly declared their autonomy from neighboring Tajik groups, are increasingly looking toward national-level ethnic leaders. Recent protests at Kabul University, which began primarily as complaints about the curriculum and the (lack of) qualifications of a handful of professors, adopted an increasingly ethnic rhetoric as national-level figures from a variety of parties and factions weighed in on the issue and, in some instances, began to apply pressure on the Ministry of Higher Education to reverse their decision to give in to protester demands. While university students today are far weaker than they were in the 1970s when they played a major role in overthrowing the government, the fact that these students, the best and the brightest in Afghanistan, have taken to the streets to protest still has symbolic importance.

Simultaneously, important notables are increasingly questioning the very structure of the current political system. Recently, elders in Kandahar called for a grand council of elders, or loyal jirga, which could potentially alter the constitution to allow Karzai to serve an additional term, while Vice-President Marshall Fahim suggested publicly that the country needed a prime minister, which of course would demand a constitutional change and massive restructuring of the government. Almost immediately, Zalmay Kha-

lizard, former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, who is perceived by many to be busy at work in behind-the-scenes negotiations between political elites about the future of the country after Karzai steps down, shot back that no such changes would be considered.

While it seems unlikely that any of these large-scale institutional changes will take place, the public nature of these conversations leaves many ordinary Afghans concerned about the longevity of the current system and what the future may bring.⁵ A shop-owner in the bazaar in Istalif pointed out to me that he had reduced the volume of stock he maintains by cautioning “who knows what 2014 will bring?” The threat of upheaval looms over both those who have prospered and those who have suffered under the current system.

Looking toward 2014 and Beyond

At the moment things remain peaceful in the orchards around Istalif. The area is relatively prosperous and the town has clearly benefited economically from the intervention. But people in the area are nervous about what the transition will bring. There is a growing sense of resentment toward what is perceived as an ineffective government, with a sense that opportunities have been wasted and a fear that international troops and development money have been key to keeping a lid on simmering tensions. With the newly fortified walls, the district government offices seem both physically and metaphorically removed from the town.

At a national level, too, there is a sense that progress has been made, with, for example, schools built and roads paved. While few will miss the international military convoys blocking traffic or driving through remote mountain villages, there is still, however, a feeling that international troops have served as a janitor of sorts for the past decade, both by holding back the Taliban, but also by keeping the political elite in check in spite of the latter’s expropriation of international funds. The withdrawal of forces may not lead to immediate political change, but the political-economy is nevertheless likely to shift and create instability on a local level. Just as Istalif waits to see if the delicate balance between government

officials, local leaders, former commanders, and other key players will hold into 2014, the rest of the country patiently holds its breath while waiting to see what the future will bring.

¹ See, for example, Dan Murphy, “Obama Seems Serious Enough that Proponents of an Extended US Military Presence in Afghanistan are Warning against it,” *Christian Science Monitor*, July 26, 2013.

² For more on this see Noah Coburn, *Bazaar Politics: Pottery and Power in an Afghan Market Town* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2011).

³ For more on this see Matthieu Aikins, “Kabubble: Counting Down to Economic Collapse in the Afghan Capital,” *Harper’s Magazine* (February 2013): 44-54.

⁴ Hesitant to speak about this due to the fear that publicity will both encourage more kidnappings and potentially disrupt fragile negotiations for those currently being held, the number of kidnappings of both foreigners and, in particular, wealthy Afghans has been grossly underreported and is now a fairly regular occurrence in many parts of the country.

⁵ For more on the current democratic system and Afghan attitudes towards it, see Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, *Derailing Democracy in Afghanistan: Elections in an Unstable Political Landscape* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

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