

## **Why Was A Political Settlement Not Achieved in Afghanistan?**

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### **Introduction**

The events following September 11, 2001 presented Afghanistan with unique opportunities to overcome a decades-long international isolation due to conflict and Taliban rule. They offered a chance to rethink and rebuild internally and to break the vicious cycle of conflict. But due to flawed design and thinking, exclusionary mechanisms, and a failure to deal with the country's troubled past, the entire post-2001 project turned into a self-defeating undertaking that grew weaker every day. The establishment collapsed after the international support that had sustained it ceased, while the peace process failed to produce a political settlement to the conflict.

### **Weakened Communities, Centralized State**

The post-2001 setup gradually deprived communities of agency and voice through top-down and highly centralized governance structures. Traditionally, local mechanisms, such as elders' councils, have governed Afghan communities in an autonomous way. In most of these local mechanisms, every significant constituency has been represented. The most important decisions concerning respective communities have usually been made by consensus. For example, the *mantaqa* (a collective of villages brought together by geography, some sort of shared or connected story about their ancestry, and economic activity in a common bazaar), where I was born and spent most of my childhood, was one of the largest such traditional formations in what is today Daykundi province. In the absence of any form of central or top-down governance during the 1990s and early 2000s, the area developed an open kind of self-governance that addressed all issues facing the community.

A local council with volunteer membership was open to any man with some sort of constituency in the community, better education, or important skills. In practice, the Council accommodated representatives of all political parties and their affiliated armed men. The council's most effective function was local conflict resolution with a capability to address both criminal cases and disputes over resources. The Council prevented conflict between political groups, villages, and families from turning violent. The Council provided opportunities for both sides of a dispute to be heard and resolved issues through a mediation process that not only engaged the parties but also the wider community. Sometimes, the negotiation process took several rounds.

Such mechanisms existed in several other *mantaqas* in Daykundi and Bamyan provinces. In areas that lacked such mechanisms, or were dominated by one party, deadly armed clashes between rival political parties or over control of resources between clans or villages were frequent. Though the Ulema [clerics] dominated most of the Council's meetings and decisions, the outcomes of such meetings were overwhelmingly secular and always considered the realities of people's living conditions, the need for maintaining inter-community coexistence, and the Council's reputation. The inclusivity and close connection to the community it represented and made decisions for, lent it legitimacy in the eyes of the people.

In a comparable number of years, the total number of people killed in this area was smaller during the Council's rule than it would be once the post-2001 republic was established. The pre-2001 Council was not only better equipped at addressing issues inside the *mantaqa* but also in dealing with issues it faced from outside, such as managing conflicts with Kuchis. In fact, there were more cases of violent death from armed clashes between Hazara villagers and Pashtun Kuchis after the mid-2000s.

State representatives sent from Kabul to replace these customary mechanisms were often unfamiliar with their disparate and complex constituency. They soon proved incompetent, corrupt, and less concerned about the people they governed. Their arrival also concentrated all powers in the hands of a few and those with stronger connections in the capital. This prevented the communities from ever owning their government.

Elections, especially local elections, would have offered the best opportunities to correct this deficit. But they were squandered by a flawed design and a rigged and manipulated process. Both at local and national levels, elections produced more losers than winners. Undermining democratic processes and using public resources, connections to Kabul, and other benefits of their first success, the winners made sure that their rivals remained the underdogs going forward.

The result was zero space for party politics, local representation, and democratic exercise and participation. People's disappointment with the promises of democracy and international assistance kept growing every day. To undermine an opponent and to create new opportunities in circumstances like this, those who dominated Afghanistan's political culture preferred disruption over the status quo without seriously thinking about long-term consequences. This was a challenge that the Ghani-led government proved incapable of overcoming. It could neither extract any concession from the Taliban, nor could it mobilize support from the anti-Taliban camp during the peace process.

### **Ethnic Conflict and Historical Grievances**

Protracted conflict destroyed and depleted Afghanistan of the social and cultural infrastructure required for sustainable peace building. Destroyed or non-existent physical infrastructure for

exchange, trade, and tourism have kept every ethnic and linguistic community confined to their geographic locations. Social ties and bonds among different regions and ethnic groups seem to have remained at low levels for decades, while conflict, the spread of extremist interpretations of religion, and a lack of channels for communication allowed the flourishing of stereotypes about and misunderstanding of the “other” ethnic, regional, or religious community. Afghanistan’s civil war was fought along ethnic lines. Discrimination based on ethnicity, religion and language was a daily experience, especially for members of ethnic and religious minorities. The country faced repeated deadlock because of strong political alignments based on ethnicity during elections. Historically marginalized communities, such as the Hazaras, believed that systematic discrimination against them continued under post-2001 governments and their areas were deliberately denied development projects. Demands of protest movements against the government’s unbalanced development policy [decisions were ignored](#). The deadly fate of the Enlightenment (*Roshanayé*) Movement that protested the re-routing of power supply line from Hazara dominated areas is one key example. Even though ethnicity underpinned any political calculation, and [scandals of ethnic favoritism marred even the presidential office](#), this was never explicitly acknowledged and thus—beyond political tokenism—no effort was made to address the problem in a systematic way.

The situation was not much different at the grassroots level. When I first started working for cross-ethnic dialogue and peace building with young participants, it was striking to see a widespread deficit of trust, fear, and discriminatory views among the youth of different ethnic groups towards one another. There had been very few opportunities for them to sit and talk with each other or visit one another’s homes and share a meal. During some interviews, when asked what they knew about a given province and if they wanted to visit a particular city, participants expressed negative stereotypical views. In one case, one participant said of Bamyan that the people of the province were “probably idol-worshippers” because of the existence of Buddha statues until they were blown up by the Taliban in March 2001. After visiting Bamyan, spending time with their hosts and visiting the empty niches where the Buddha statues once were, these young people expressed deep regret about their destruction, saw them as a shared cultural heritage, and had developed good relationships with those they had met. Most of the participants found their experiences similarly transformative by the end of their exchanges and visits to the main ethnic and regional centers of the country.

Grassroots efforts to tap into cultural values and common heritage had huge potential for building an enduring peace in Afghanistan. They could also have countered the spread of violent extremism. But unfortunately, no systematic effort was made to promote such dialogue among different communities. The absence of sustained dialogue at the grassroots level kept the public disengaged from the peace process. Moreover, the absence of a discourse on a just and enduring peace made mobilization for peace more difficult even as religious extremists' calls for violence and intolerance grew louder. The extremists dominated platforms at the grassroots, especially, outside the urban centers.

### **Prevailing Culture of Impunity**

Decades of conflict in Afghanistan have deeply affected, directly or indirectly, all the people of Afghanistan. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has [recorded more than 120,000 civilian casualties since 2009](#). [Civilian and military casualties counted together obviously stand even higher](#). The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) estimated victims of conflict before 2001 at more than 2 million. The commission of atrocities, war crimes, and crimes against humanity as well as genocidal campaigns against civilians of at-risk ethnic and religious communities have taken place during the past several decades of conflict. After the fall of the Taliban in late 2001, however, no effort was made to address Afghanistan's bloody past [despite widespread support from the public](#) for such an effort. An entrenched culture of impunity took over instead.

Gradually, those accused of past crimes organized themselves after a brief period of relative isolation and came to dominate the political scene. Support for transitional justice efforts among the international community also disappeared as the conflict intensified. Ill-advised peace efforts and attempts at reaching a political settlement assumed that peace and justice were mutually exclusive. Additionally, the politicization of transitional justice further weakened victims' demands for accountability. The technocratic elite exploited this agenda for personal politics in an effort to sideline their mujahidin rivals. Wounds of different periods of conflict remained open.

Nothing changed up to the last days of negotiations with the Taliban. Despite widespread demands from victims of war across the country for inclusion, no meaningful effort was made to hear victims' demands or include their representatives in the process. The Republic and its peace building structures and institutions continuously failed to acknowledge the significance of victims' participation in the peace process and its impacts on long-term peace building. And, although the composition of the Republic's negotiating delegation was diverse, they were not seen as true representatives of the constituencies they were supposed to represent. They were not chosen by the different constituencies that made the Republic and thus were seen as unable to independently represent them. Aware of this deficiency, they complained of how constrained they were by the Republic's top-down approach during their engagement with the Taliban.

Afghanistan's contemporary history is full of quick and easy takeovers and repeated failures. It has experienced rulers with stints in power as short as a few weeks and as long as several decades. But it has never enjoyed peace and it never will until the root causes of conflict are addressed and structures are developed capable of managing the country's diversity.