

## **Underestimating the Local Understanding of Problems: The Tragedy of Governance and Peace in Afghanistan**

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*Published March 21, 2023 as part of a collection of essays produced from a colloquium hosted by the American Institute of Afghanistan Studies and the US Institute of Peace in Washington, DC in July 2022.*

### **Introduction**

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan collapsed on August 15, 2021. The speed of the collapse stunned not only the people of Afghanistan but also the republic's international supporters. For many, including the country's citizens, the speed of the collapse and the reasons behind it remain a mystery. While certain aspects of the international community's failure pertaining to the peace efforts have already been addressed by academicians and practitioners, some of the unspoken facts in this regard may reveal more of the picture.

This essay argues that Afghanistan's international partners, led by the United States, have never paid attention to local understandings of Afghanistan's political and social complexities, and have, instead, always seen the country through a few sets of eyes. In so doing, they accepted a narrow interpretation of Afghanistan's issues as the only possible truth about the country. Ignoring the local understanding of Afghanistan's problems, giving unconditional support to members of the diaspora, and disregarding the alternative narratives of intellectuals and political groups in Afghanistan led the country to its downfall.

Afghanistan, a multiethnic and multi-linguistic country, is a fragmented society. The international community, while attempting to build the state, overlooked the main cause of the conflict: the absence of a viable mechanism for power redistribution among ethnic groups. For instance, the demands for a parliamentary system and decentralized governance by non-Pashtuns were always ignored. The 2004 Afghanistan constitution, which resembles the monarchic-era constitution of 1964, grants more power to the president than the 1964 constitution granted to the country's former king. Many Afghans believe that a group of Afghan Americans and other international actors masterminded the 2004 constitution granting such extensive powers to the president and, thus, caused the monopolization of power, bias and discrimination in this ethnically divided country.

Those in power, particularly Ashraf Ghani and his circle of elites, painted a picture of Afghanistan that was unrealistic while manipulating and misusing power in ways that derided the new democratic institutions. Corruption, like a blackhole, engulfed the vast majority of

government officials and NGOs even as they sold a narrative invoking modernization and reform. Were any of these elites in a position to advocate for the rule of law, transparency, accountability, and the institutionalization of democratic values? How did their failures affect the possibilities for success of a peace process?

### **Governance and the Rule of Law**

In 2014, with the formation of the National Unity Government (NUG), I became the spokesperson of the Ministry of Education. In the seven years prior, the Ministry of Education was in the hands of a notoriously corrupt figure who worked not only as a minister but also as an acting prime minister under President Karzai. I would come to see some of the most corrupt officials in the Ministry of Education were under the patronage of the next president, Ashraf Ghani. During the National Unity Government, President Ghani's treatment of the ministers introduced to the cabinet by NUG CEO, Dr. Abdullah, was different from that of his own ministers. In fact, he managed his relationship with the Abdullah-aligned ministries not through the minister, an Abdullah appointee, but through Ghani's own team of deputies.

In 2015, the U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) accused former Minister of Education, Farooq Wardak, of having been involved in corruption regarding ghost schools and teachers and embezzlement in book printing contracts. The president appointed a fact-finding commission to investigate the case. The members of this commission submitted their findings to the president, but no practical steps were taken by the president to address the allegations in the report. Farooq Wardak not only did not go to court, but the president appointed him as the head of another fact-finding commission, this one for the fall of Kunduz province. In 2017 Wardak was appointed as a Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs which he held until 2020. Meanwhile, Yousef Ghasanfar, the president's special representative for economic development, trade and poverty reduction, was alleged to have embezzled millions of dollars. In 2007, he received \$65 million in Japanese aid from the Ministry of Finance under the guise of three different companies; he failed to repay the loan for 12 years, making his total debt (with fines) \$100 million by 2020.

Not only were President Ghani's teammates violating the law, but he, himself, was acting above it. In one of his most controversial violations, the president unilaterally annulled the Population Registration Law, which he had signed in 2014. This law ensured that the ethnicity of Afghanistan's citizens was not mentioned in their electronic ID cards. In 2020, Ghani issued a decree that required both the ethnicity and the controversial word "Afghan" to be included in the electronic ID for all of Afghanistan's people.

In another example of overstep, the president unlawfully extended the acting ministers' tenures after those who were sent for a vote of confidence to the parliament were deemed ineligible. When the NUG began, almost 50% of the government cabinet was headed by acting ministers for several months. In the second term of President Ghani's government, some of his cabinet ministers, including the heads of important departments such as the Central Bank of Afghanistan, were never approved by parliament, but remained in their jobs until the end. He ran

the ministries with acting heads because, unlike ministers who received a vote of confidence from the parliament, those with the interim title could be easily dismissed, leaving room for him to negotiate with those seeking to make trouble among opposition groups. Meanwhile, he removed the ministers chosen by Abdullah's team, mostly non-Pashtuns, despite them having received a vote of confidence from the parliament. Without any substantial explanation, Ghani dismissed from their offices Minister of Energy and Water Ali Ahmad Osmani in 2018, as well as Minister of Finance Abdul Hadi Arghandiwal in 2020.

At the same time, Ghani appointed a number of people loyal to him to a range of positions for which they not qualified. He appointed Haroon Chakhansuri, a spokesman holding a degree from Australia in Public Administration, as an acting Foreign Minister and later as Afghanistan's Minister of Mines. He appointed a former spokesperson, Nazifullah Salarzi, a very young physician as representative of Afghanistan to the United Nations despite the Ministry of Foreign Affairs rules governing appointments to diplomatic missions. Hamdollah Moheb, a computer engineer, received one of the most important positions as the president's national security advisor. During the last two years of the government, Moheb dismissed and installed security institution heads and made their positions accountable to him, even while he had no experience and knowledge of security issues. The list of unprofessional appointees close to the president in the most key government posts was very long.

Ajmal Ahmadi, another figure close to the president, was appointed as acting director of the Central Bank, after which Ahmadi removed the Supreme Council of the Bank and the Board of Directors. In their place, he appointed his loyalists, despite their lack of expertise in banking. As head of the Ministry of Commerce, he had previously unlawfully dismissed more than 20 heads of departments in a decree against the Civil Service Law. During his tenure, the Central Bank, which was supposed to operate independently, was reduced to a dependent institution serving the president. The legal and monetary crises that occurred as the result of Ahmadi's reckless actions were published in an investigative report entitled "Crisis in the heart of the financial system; what did Ajmal Ahmadi do with the central bank?" on July 14, 2021 in *Hasht e Subh* newspaper with the relevant documents.

As the Covid-19 epidemic spread in Afghanistan and a quarantine was imposed in 2020, the Ministry of Finance allocated 2 billion and 200 million *afghanis* to distribute bread to the country's thirty-four provinces. These funds were misappropriated in all provinces as the money did not reach the poor. *Hasht e Subh* published corruption reports on several provinces, including Kabul. The biggest corruption case was in Kabul perpetrated by the Kabul Municipality. Municipal officials and members of the Kabul City Bakeries Union embezzled more than 800 million *afghanis* (more than \$ 10 million) in 2020, money allocated for the distribution of bread.

The National Procurement Office, which held its meetings under the direct chairmanship of the President, was involved in all stages of the contract process for these relief efforts. The Kabul mayor at this time was Davood Soltanzoi, one of the most loyal associates of President Ghani. He never faced any kind of investigation. Kandahar Governor Hayatullah Hayat, who was

removed from Kandahar province after our paper reported on the corruption of his Covid-19 budget, was reappointed as Interior Minister by the president. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that Ghani's former finance minister Eklil Hakimi has bought ten properties in California, worth more than \$10 million total. Another former finance minister, Homayoun Qayyumi, was accused of corruption by the Afghan parliament in 2020.

The vast majority of key figures loyal to the president were accused of corruption, but none of these people faced any kind of trial. Instead, the president handed over the Hazara Minister of Telecommunications, Abdul Razzaq Vahidi, to the court in 2019 on charges of corruption, which the court acquitted him of, and the accusation of corruption against him was proved false.

### **The Failure of Peace Talks**

Another figure who has been highly influential in Afghanistan over the past twenty years is Afghan American Zalmay Khalilzad. In his 2016 book *The Envoy*, whenever he mentioned the Pashtuns, Khalilzad emphasized the size of their population and considered them to be the most decisive ethnic group in Afghan politics. As Special Envoy for Afghanistan and then U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan during the Bush administration, Khalilzad heavily influenced U.S. policy toward the country. He pushed binary narratives of majority vs. minority ethnic groups, builders vs. spoilers, and technocrats vs. warlords. U.S. government support for Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun leader, to be selected chairman of the Afghan Interim Administration, and then interim president in 2002, reflected Khalilzad's views and narratives.

In the controversial 2019 presidential election, Khalilzad, according to associates of Dr. Abdullah, threatened to cancel the inauguration ceremony after the two presidential candidates announced parallel inauguration ceremonies. Ghani and Khalilzad were not in agreement on the U.S. peace talks with the Taliban. Ghani, like Karzai, was outraged against Khalilzad when he signed a peace deal between the Trump administration and the Taliban in 2020. Ghani and his circle considered Khalilzad to be conspiring to oust Ghani from power.

During intra-Afghan negotiations, the Taliban proposed a transitional period, of which a key condition was President Ghani stepping down. The High Peace Council and all Afghan political opposition groups joined forces against Ghani and supported him leaving the office of president, for the greater good. But Ghani rejected these efforts and wanted to lead the transitional period; Khalilzad was not able to persuade Ghani to step down.

In October 2020, I traveled to Doha with a group of Afghan media officials during the Doha talks with the president, first vice president, and a number of their colleagues. During the two days trip we met with the Taliban negotiating team. They did not support the destruction of all achievements; according to them, this was the wish of the neighboring countries. Although it is difficult to trust the Taliban, perhaps, with Ghani's ouster at the time, a group of political groups inside Afghanistan working with the international community could have forced the Taliban to accept some of the gains of the past 20 years.

After President Trump's administration signed a peace deal with the Taliban in February 2020, negotiations between the Republic government and the Taliban were supposed to begin. President Ghani started sabotaging these negotiations. Trump may have forced him to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners, but Ghani refused to hand over the management of the peace process to the Supreme National Reconciliation Council, which included representatives of all political and civil movements in Afghanistan and was tasked with advancing the peace process. Instead, he appointed people close to him to lead the republic's negotiating team and take over the management of the process from the National Reconciliation Council.

Fawzia Kofi, a member of the government's negotiating team, wrote an essay in *Hasht e Subh* after the fall of Kabul about the president's efforts to monopolize the peace process. His proxies, Stanekzai and Salam Rahimi, opened a back channel without other members of the negotiating team, talking to Taliban in terms not known by the team itself. Rahimi actually returned to Kabul after the fall of the republic and met with Taliban senior leaders, praising the group for their real Islamic justice.

In these ways, the withdrawal of American troops exposed a system that had already collapsed from within due to the corruption and stubbornness of President Ghani and his teammates during the time of his presidency and the peace talks.

### **Lack of Belonging and Nostalgia for Afghanistan**

On June 13, 2022, the *Wall Street Journal* reported on Afghan government officials fleeing their expensive homes after the Taliban takeover. The report, however, only touched the tip of an iceberg. Why had so many in politics bought houses outside Afghanistan? Because they were not thinking about developing their own villages or investing inside the country. These officials had lost the connection to their villages for the last twenty years. They only went to the people when they needed their votes. Especially for those who held foreign citizenship, Afghanistan was a palace between Kabul airport and the Green Zone. They were totally disconnected from the countryside. They saw Afghanistan as an opportunity to accumulate wealth. They each went home after their careers were over and never returned to Afghanistan. In other words, the role of these corrupt technocrats in the system's collapse was far greater than the role of the warlords, whom they never failed to demonize.

The lack of connection between these officials and the security forces was another manifestation of the distance between the Kabul-based corrupt elites and the poor villages.

None of these officials had children among the ANDSF ranks, and, in many cases, their family members did not live inside the country. The Afghan security forces, the vast majority of whom were from rural Afghanistan, joined the army due to struggles with poverty, in a fight to survive. Our government was never able to provide them with a narrative of national honor to match their service.

One week before the fall, the president invited a group of journalists and media officials to the palace. As the districts were falling, one after the other, and the provinces started falling, the

president was so calm, operating as if we were far from the moment of collapse, unable to grasp the loss of those gains made possible by countless casualties and sacrifices. He talked about the types of insurgency from Spain to Sri Lanka. He said that geography was not important for his government but soldiers were. He said he wanted forces to retreat from vulnerable areas and gather and defend themselves on provincial bases. But no one knew what was behind those irrelevant words in those moments.

We returned from the presidential palace that evening, agonized by concerns, because we did not see the plight of our people in the face of the president. He made his decision and disrupted the game from which he and those around him had been eliminated, and, with his sudden escape, shattered a dream that cost us and our international allies so much. Meanwhile, the forgotten villages, which for the past twenty years had no ownership in managing their own miserable lives, conquered the center on 15 August.