

## Why Was a Political Settlement not Achieved in Afghanistan?

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Why was a political settlement not achieved in Afghanistan? To answer this question, one must delve into the murky and elusive stories of the past 21 years (2001-2022) in Afghanistan, a web of twisted threads that need to be untangled one by one. By embarking on this journey of reflecting on the past, one encounters the undeniable dilemma of what to write about, which story to pick among the countless that have eventually led to the events of 15th August and, ultimately, the failure to find a political settlement in Afghanistan.

For this essay, I want to tell the story of a young woman in her early twenties who decided to run for the parliamentary elections in Kabul. When I met her for the first time, she had just come to Kabul from another province. She struck me as a bold, brave, opinionated, and intelligent woman. We soon became friends and began seeing each other often. In the time that followed, we shared stories about our childhood during the Taliban, the darkness that had covered the lives of our mothers and sisters, our love for education, and our hopes for Afghanistan's future. In the evenings, we would often go to a café in Kabul and enjoy seeing the crowd of young women and men who sipped their tea or coffee, cracked jokes, and laughed with each other. But in the second year of our friendship, we drifted apart. I had a new job and school that took most of my time. We kept in touch and met but not as often as before. One day, I received a text from her saying she was going to run for a seat in the parliament in Kabul, and she needed me to join her campaign. She said, now is the time.

When I read the text, I thought she was trying to mess with me. I called her, and it turned out she had, indeed, begun the preparations. I went to her house later that day. A group of young men and women were sitting in the living room and were setting in motion a plan for collecting signatures from registered voters. According to the election law, each nominee had to present 1000 voting cards and signatures from registered voters to the Independent Elections Commission (IEC) to qualify as a candidate. By this time, it was a widespread practice among the nominees to purchase voting cards and signatures in return for 500-1000 *afghanis* from people willing to sell. Around 200-300 voting cards were stacked on a table as the team strategized for their campaign.

My friend began speaking about opening campaign offices in various locations in Kabul, including Wazir Akbar Khan, Taimani, Kart e Se, and other neighborhoods. I asked from where

the money for all of this would come. I knew how little she and her husband were making at their jobs; it was hardly enough for their monthly bills. The campaign that she was planning required hundreds of thousands of dollars. She said she had some powerful friends that were going to help her. She did not tell me who they were, but I had a sense of who they might be.

Later that night, I took my leave and told her I could not help with the campaign. She understood and said, "okay, as you wish, no problem." I was sad walking home. I knew that she was going to win that seat, but for all the wrong reasons and by the wrong means. She did not have the education, the experience, the financial resources, the political background, or the understanding of the complexities that came with the job.

Soon the streets of Kabul were filled with her posters and banners. The messages on the banners spoke of eliminating corruption, a noble future, the importance of unity, and women's power. In 2005, when the posters of parliamentarian candidates, especially those of women, went up in the city, it was a time of celebration. People felt like they had a say in who their representatives and leaders would be. They felt powerful. I remember one picture very vividly, that of Sabrena Saqib, wearing a yellow scarf and smiling at the camera. That picture revolutionized the public space in Kabul. She had brought a bright color, a smile, and a woman's face back to the streets that had hidden the faces of women under the chadari for years. It was a hopeful image.

My friend's campaign continued and gained momentum. The elections took place. The turnout was the lowest in the history of elections in Afghanistan until then, with some reports suggesting only 20% of eligible voters went to the polling stations. Reports of widespread fraud fell on deaf ears; a new parliament was announced, and my friend got a seat.

We did not stay in touch, but after some time, I saw her again at a friend's house. She offered to drop me home after dinner. Two armored vehicles and several bodyguards were waiting outside. We headed to her house first, and then the driver would drop me at my place. Her new house was a three-story building in the heart of the most expensive neighborhood in Wazir Akbar Khan.

I am telling this story because I was a witness. But I know that almost every member of the parliament had arrived at "the people's house" following a similar path. Most MPs were either sons or daughters of warlords, incompetent and powerless individuals backed by strongmen, mafia, businessmen and women, or allies of the governments. The actual manifestation of the will of the people did not exist. I could not count on one hand the number of representatives from the past 20 years that indeed came to the House by clean and democratic means.

After securing seats in the parliament, the MPs never returned to their provinces. People had no access to their so-called representatives; they had to wait for months in Kabul if they needed to meet an MP and raise an issue with them. The MPs spent their nights around dinner tables set by cabinet candidates to trade their votes of confidence. They registered NGOs and businesses under fake names and used their status and influence to get projects from the government and international organizations. They became millionaires by stealing funds from construction,

humanitarian, women's empowerment, mining, and other projects. The money they stole from Afghanistan was spent on purchasing villas, vacation houses, and setting up businesses in Dubai, Istanbul, and other parts of the world. By 2021, the parliament represented a house of thieves, hated by the public, with no real decision-making power, and mostly in the pocket of President Ghani and his administration.

Why did this happen? And how did this impact Afghanistan? There is no one answer to this question. But a significant part of the answer lies in the country's electoral system. A review of the impact of the Single None Transferable Vote system (SNTV) can shed light on the broader answer about why a political settlement was not achieved in Afghanistan. Elections are one of the most essential institutions of democracy. The type of electoral system that is used defines how a democracy functions.

In the SNTV system, voters cast a single vote for an individual candidate, not a party. Each province elects a certain number of candidates based on its population (mostly calculated along ethnic lines); each voter can only vote for one candidate. The candidate with the highest number of votes wins the seat regardless of what percentage they got. For instance, if the province has seven seats, and if one candidate gets 80% of the province's vote, the other 20% would be divided between the other six individual candidates. The lowest vote-getter could win the seat with any percent of the votes. A candidate with 3 % votes could win a seat and claim to represent the whole of a province.

Choosing SNTV as the electoral system fragmented Afghanistan's already fragile political culture by shrinking the role of parties and enhancing the rise of person-centric and patronage-based politics. It institutionalized corruption by paving the path for incapable and meritless individuals to occupy one of the most important institutions of political representation and expression. President Hamid Karzai selected SNTV as the electoral system because it guaranteed that no substantial and organized political opposition could be formed to challenge his power. His grip on power remained autocratic and unchallenged for nearly 14 years.

In the past two decades, person-centric and patronage politics supplanted the possibility of collective political organization in all of Afghanistan other than where the Taliban dominated. Political parties can play a significant role in enhancing democratic and political processes in society. They select candidates to run for seats and win elections. They act as intermediaries between the people and the power. They represent and protect the interests of the people. They empower the people to access or challenge power. They create social debates and educate people about issues that concern their lives and fate. When parties are stripped of their function to select and win elections, they cease to exist or become irrelevant.

The only political parties that maintained engagement with the people were the remains of parties created by the Pakistani ISI and the CIA during the years of *jihad* against the Soviet Union. These parties, such as Hizb e Islami, Jamiat e Islami, Dawat, and some new ones such as Hizb Tahrir, are all ultra-right and Islamic extremists with ideologies almost identical to that of

the Taliban. These groups were the dominant political force that engaged and produced thought and debate across Afghanistan. Despite some efforts by progressive groups such as Afghanistan 1400, A-3, Azadagan, and others, the space for progressive political engagement was largely left open and manipulated by radical groups that gained power by radicalizing the young among their ranks.

When progressive groups like 1400, Junbish Roshanaye, Rastakhez, and A-3 emerged, they raised high hopes for a new era of political engagement in society, particularly among youth and university students. Many students hoped to become a member and begin their political careers. These groups organized well and grew exponentially in a short period. But when the parliamentary and presidential elections came around, influential members of these groups acted individually. They ran for office or aligned with different campaigns in pursuit of power, producing divisions within the groups and eventually spelling their end.

The selection of SNTV as the electoral system in Afghanistan was a pivotal mistake that cut off the buds of democracy before they could bloom. It played a direct role in the crumbling of Afghanistan's political landscape. The expansion and institutionalization of corruption led to the government's lack of credibility and thus its failure to represent, protect and enhance the interest of the people of Afghanistan in the talks with the Taliban. Had organized political movements grounded in the society – and not a group of individuals driven by self-interest alone – sat across from the Taliban in the negotiations, the result would have been different. The flight of Ghani and his team would not have brought down the surrounding institutions, and Afghanistan would not have been left to the Taliban.