



SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report builds on several initiatives by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) to explore how a growing youth population and an increasing number of young political leaders are reshaping Afghan politics. Drawing on 160 interviews with politically active youth, university students, and young journalists in seven of Afghanistan's thirty-four provinces—Kabul, Kandahar, Khost, Herat, Balkh, Bamiyan, and Nangarhar—from June to November 2013, this report complements a focused ethnographic study by Anna Larson and Noah Coburn of three communities in and around Kabul city published by USIP in January 2014.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Gran Hewad and Casey Garret Johnson

A Rough Guide to Afghan Youth Politics

Summary

- The growth of subnational youth political organizations since 2001 is in many cases synonymous with the emergence of a civil society in Afghanistan. Youth see civil society organizations as one route to political power.
- Youth politics in 2013 is still deeply tied to old-guard political networks. In many provinces, power brokers use youth organizations to maintain political control. Continuing dominance of the old guard will likely prevent the emergence of a youth bloc or a youth vote in the upcoming elections.
- Although youth activists recognize their demographic weight, they view themselves as a transitional generation—and see their sons and daughters as the first truly new political generation.
- The gap between youth organizations in Kabul and those in the provinces is large and both physical and conceptual. In the capital the focus, not surprisingly, is on influencing policy. Kabul-based organizations that receive the majority of international attention act more as pressure groups and think tanks than political parties. Kabul-based youth-led parties that function as such have so far established only a limited presence in provinces.
- Youth organizations based in provincial capitals are less concerned with policy and more concerned with basic outreach and service delivery. These groups are composed of individuals with education and worldviews similar to those of their national counterparts but struggle to establish connections, either upward to national parties or downward to the districts.
- More youth are running for provincial council seats than in 2009, but many of these are seen as proxies of provincial power brokers. Youth perceptions of transition often reflect those of the greater population: Some feel that transition is needed and will go forward with fewer negative effects on security and livelihoods than speculated on in the media; others speak of a return to civil war as a matter of when rather than if.

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Introduction

The various types of emerging youth political parties, networks, and organizations throughout Afghanistan today, as well as the status of existing youth wings of old-guard political parties are critical to the future of the country and how the transition unfolds. How are youth organizing and mobilizing and for what purpose? How deep are their networks? What are their aspirations and plans for the April 2014 presidential and provincial council elections? How do they view transition? What type of support do they need going forward? How do youth politics differ between provinces and between the center and periphery? Most important, what is their relationship to the old-guard political elite and provincial power brokers?

What Is an “Afghan Youth” Anyway?

In Afghanistan, *youth* is an expansive term. Respondents up to thirty-five years of age consistently self-identified as youth (*jawan/zwan*) during interviews and were apt to speak of youth more as a state of mind than a stage of life. If the international community is guilty of conflating youth politics in Afghanistan with progressive politics, this is partly because many Afghan youth—especially those who regularly interact with internationals—speak in these terms as well. When asked for a definition, one interviewee from Kabul province responded that a youth was

a person or group of people who think about the future of the country. If a person is young and backward thinking, we do not consider that person a youth. But if someone's age is not more than 30 years and still thinks for the future of the country and has a youthful thinking then he/she is considered youth from our perspective despite the age limit.¹

Respondents in Herat consistently referred to former governor Daud Shah Saba as young, despite his being forty-nine years old, because of his progressive politics, technocratic approach to governance, and consistent support to youth networks during his term. The same interviewees lamented that the Herat provincial council was devoid of youth leaders because the chairman of the council, Wahed Qatali, despite being under thirty-five, has old-school politics and rose to power through family ties to provincial strongman Ismael Khan. The same is true in the south, where the strongest individual to emerge since 2001 has been Brigadier General Abdul Raziq, the thirty-four-year-old chief of police of Kandahar province. Raziq is emblematic not of progressive youth politics but of a new generation of strongman leadership.

We define youth as those who were too young to actively participate in the anti-Soviet jihad—either as fighters or fundraisers for mujahideen military parties or on the side of the communist government. By this definition, the term *youth* includes those well into their mid-thirties.² It does not exclude youth from association with the old-guard parties—such as Jamiat-e Islami, Hizb-e Islami, Junbesh-e Milli—because many youth are currently members of the youth wings of these parties or are the sons and daughters of their leading members. It does, however, in many cases put them outside the leadership structure of these parties, which is a negative in terms of gaining actual decision-making power, but a positive in that they are not directly implicated in some of the abuses of these parties, particularly those committed during the 1992–96 civil war.

Afghan youth are thus defined here by the transitional nature of their generation. They are tied to the politics and the environment of the Taliban and pre-Taliban eras (even if they spent this time in exile) but have come of age in a vastly different (though often no less violent) post-2001 world.

Given this history, understanding young political actors and their decision-making processes is still very much a matter of understanding their family. Tribe and ethnicity may come into play at some point, but often only secondarily. Like many social aspects of Afghanistan, the immediate and extended family unit are a key determinant of how youth think and act politically. Where the family stands on issues of education (secular or religious); where it aligned itself politically during the jihad, Taliban, and post-2001 eras (pro- or antigovernment); and the livelihood consequences of these decisions remain key determinants for youth involvement in politics today. As one respondent noted, “If the youth cannot make a simple and small decision within their family, how can we expect them to politically represent the community?”³

Youth in Kabul whose fathers are prominent old-guard politicians often get positions—if not always political power—because of their family ties, even as they lead the young elite political movements attempting to dissociate themselves from their fathers’ politics. One Kabul-based youth explained it this way:

We put aside our family backgrounds on some issues and at some times, but this family history is still a factor, even for the most educated and progressive youth. At the end of the day, the son of Jamiati is still a Jamiati, like the son of communist is still the son of a communist.⁴

In this way, issues of honor, family legacy, and communal duty—terms used most often to describe tribal or traditional values—remain in play for the youth. Whether conservative or liberal in their politics, Afghan youth are pulled between two eras, particularly as technology-driven communication and direct exposure to the West drives a broader worldview. This is one of the fundamental reasons that youth political movements at both the national and provincial level remain fragmented and will likely line up behind an older generation of power brokers in the coming elections. As one interviewee in Kandahar explained of the current balance of power, “In our province, the younger generation is slowly gaining decision-making power within their families and in their immediate villages, but the youth still have almost no say in political matters at the provincial level due to the dominance of power brokers and government strongmen mainly from the older generation.”⁵

Given the conflict between inherited values and status quo power dynamics on one hand and contemporary events, education, and exposure on the other, many youth organizations spend a good deal of time and energy on internal debates over policy and tactics. What actual say youth will have in the statebuilding process is largely unknown at this point because internal debates are ongoing.

Don’t Call It a Party

After more than thirty years of war waged in large part by political-military parties, it is no surprise that the youth of today—particularly in the provinces—shy away from describing their movements as parties.⁶ Even youth members of old-guard political parties were quick to admit during interviews the negative impact that political parties have had on the stability of the country over the last three decades. Anecdotally, youth membership in these old-guard parties is in decline for a number of reasons: real and perceived corruption, under-performance, inability to live up to religious standards,⁷ lack of autonomy from foreign funders,⁸ and the nature of an Afghan political system—in which political power is won on the basis of personal connections, patronage, and service provision rather than on the ability of parties themselves to organize voting blocs based on interests and policies. This latter point is especially true in a place like Kandahar, where one youth group leader remarked,

Everything here is done by tribal leaders not political parties. The population of Kandahar has been divided on a family and tribal basis—the Karzai’s and the Achekzai

and the Alkozai—and each have their own leaders and decision makers over every village, and the political parties have not been able to do anything for the youth in the province.⁹

Of the seven provinces where interviews were conducted for this study, youth wing membership of old-guard parties was lowest in Khost, Kandahar, and Herat. According to an interviewee from Khost,

Political parties have no plans that would mobilize the youth and provide them with political opportunities. Political parties have got only representatives in provinces but no activities like in Kabul. They do not care about the ideas they receive from provinces. This is the same for both the old political parties and the new political parties like Haq wa Adalat that don't have influence in remote provinces like ours.¹⁰

The notable exception to the overall decline in youth wing membership for old-guard parties is Junbesh-e Milli. Junbesh was established in the early 1990s by the Uzbek commander Abdul Rashid Dostum, currently the first vice-presidential candidate on Ashraf Ghani's 2014 presidential ticket. The Junbesh youth wing maintains a strong, ethnically-based recruiting network in the north among the Uzbek and Turkmen communities, which are largely driven by communal fears of the return of the Taliban and are under the charismatic leadership of Dostum, who is perceived by many from the northeast to be the main defender of his Uzbek ethnic group.

Nationwide, the youth who do continue to join these old-guard parties do so in part because the parties continue to offer monetary incentives, job opportunities, and scholarships at a time when the two most commonly cited needs were education and income. One interviewee from Kabul province explained the various factors youth will assess before deciding to join a political party:

Youth look for the achievements of a political party before joining the party. Others join because of their family background—they join because their father or the whole family belongs to a specific party. Another group of youth have no interest in the achievements of a political party or if their family were members, they are only looking at the material benefits they will gain after joining the party.¹¹

That youth involvement with old-guard parties is primarily a transactional relationship is underscored by the fact that the most vocal critics of old-guard political parties are often youth wing members themselves.

Given the stigma attached to political parties, both the idealistic younger generation and their opportunistic elders have distanced themselves from such labels, preferring instead to form youth societies, associations, movements, organizations, and networks. Youth-led or youth-centric political parties established in the last half-decade have often gone to great lengths to distance themselves from the party stigma by focusing heavily on charity-type outreach activities and public service. These groups nonetheless act and think politically—though not always coherently.

A young journalist from Balkh placed youth today into three categories:

First, you have unaligned youth; second, youth who are aligned with a political party, a jihadi leader, or some other type of ethnic group; and in the third category you have some talented young people with a good understanding of politics. This last group considers the past and current political leaders as 'dealers' [and] not as good politicians.¹²

On the other side of the country, a student at Khost University made a similar distinction:

Sixty-eight percent of the population is youth, but 58 percent of these are being used by warlords or political authorities or parties, only 10 percent participate in politics using their own minds and their own talents and are actually serving the country.¹³

In the absence of a few strong old-guard parties able to attract the young generation, and without as yet a coherent grassroots youth movement, the youth political landscape is, like Afghan politics more generally, highly localized and dominated by context-specific patron-client relationships. In the words of Afghan political analyst S. Reza Kazemi, what exists today is a "scattered and largely manipulated youth landscape in Afghanistan."¹⁴

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National

Given this level of fragmentation, youth political movements resist easy definition or categorization. At the Kabul level, this report identifies at least four basic types of youth political movements outside the standard youth wing model of registered old-guard political parties. The caveat is that these are broad definitions and many movements do not fall cleanly into one category or another and that even the strongest national parties are struggling to establish roots in even a handful of key provinces outside Kabul.

1. Those established since 2001 and led by old-guard politicians aimed at attracting younger members with pro-reform agendas. These offer greater decision-making power than is given to youth wings of old-guard parties. The most notable example at the national level is Rights and Justice (Haq wa Adalat).

Rights and Justice, formed in 2011, is recognized as a pro-reform, technocratic party and is led by former Afghan ambassador to Pakistan Sardar Mohammed Roshan. Hanif Atmar, former minister of interior, heads its political committee and is the de facto figurehead. The party's leadership ranks are filled with former members of parliament, diplomats, and human rights and civil society activists. Although the party has struggled to establish a serious network in the provinces, it has areas of support in Herat, Farah, Balkh, Helmand, Kunduz, Khost, Laghman, and Badghis and opened an office in Kandahar in 2013. As of early February 2014, the party was publicly backing Ashraf Ghani's presidential ticket.

From the outset, Rights and Justice has attracted a younger demographic largely because youth participated in the party's formation and stood against the conventional approach of having a separate youth wing. Youth party members say the integrated structure has given them more decision-making power. In the first intraparty elections of 2011, youth won about one-third of the central council seats and were active in all committees—in many cases occupying a clear majority of seats on the (old-guard-headed) political and communication committees. At the subnational level, Rights and Justice's provincial leadership differs from region to region. In the west, north, northeast, and central regions, these councils are led by youth, whereas they are led mostly by the older generation in the south, southeast, and east.

Today, Rights and Justice reports that more than half of its members are youths. Forty-seven of the seventy-five candidates for the 2014 provincial council elections affiliated with the party, according to one member of the central committee, are youths. About five members in the Kabul office, including two members of the central council, are working to empower youth members and candidates, though no specific committee or program for this task has been established. One member involved in providing support to youth candidates was realistic in his assessment of intraparty hierarchies when he admitted that the old guard was still very much in charge and that their ideas and positions were deferred to in a sign of respect.

Critics of Rights and Justice say that in attempting to have a new agenda with the same old leadership, it tries to have it both ways and so, ultimately, has neither. Supporters say that it is the most pragmatic model in that it balances the need for reform against societal realities and Afghan realpolitik.¹⁵ What this balance looked like in early December of 2013 was stated support of the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with the United States by Hanif Atmar, but no concerted political action by the party itself.

2. Those established since 2001 by old-guard leaders that have transferred control of their central committees to the younger generation. Solidarity of Afghanistan is one example of a party that has made the transition from an old-guard party—that is, formed and led by former communists and mujahideen-era commanders and activists—to a party whose leadership is largely made up of youth. Founded in 2004, the party was controlled by old-guard leaders until 2009. In 2009, it supported Hamid Karzai for president, a position that widened

the internal rifts over leadership. Within the party, it was the youth wing that staked out a more forceful, leftist, nonviolent, and anti-foreign troop position and argued that the party could not support a presidential candidate as long as foreign troops were occupying the country. This position contrasted with the more pragmatic leadership of the old generation, which saw support for Karzai as necessary from a patronage standpoint.

In the spring of 2010, Solidarity held its second congress in the party's six-year history. Dawud Razmak, a thirty-one-year-old medical student, was elected as party chairman.¹⁶ Party leaders then traveled to the provinces advocating for more youth representation in provincial leadership councils, a position that has been widely embraced. At the national level, Solidarity claims that about 70 percent of its forty-seven-member central congress is today composed of youth.¹⁷ Old leaders still play an advisory role, but party control seems to be firmly in the hands of younger generation leaders, who remain inflexible in their anti-foreign troop stance. In late October 2013, Chairman Razmak stated, "We believe that elections in the presence of the international forces are just a scenario that is going to be organized for the election of a puppet president. That is why we are going to boycott the presidential elections." Razmak went on to say that the party would not boycott the provincial council elections and that five Solidarity party members were running for provincial council seats in five different provinces.¹⁸

If anything, Solidarity has weakened under the control of the younger generation. The decision to boycott the presidential elections is likely to have an adverse impact on provincial council candidates, whose ability to fund-raise is often linked to political alliances (essentially joint campaigning) with better-funded presidential candidates.¹⁹ As of early December 2013, Solidarity had struck an anti-BSA stance and was supporting Karzai's refusal to sign the agreement. Solidarity is a reminder that while youth political movements may be progressive in their desire to break with traditional patronage politics, the positions they stake out are not necessarily pro-Western.

3. *Those established since 2001 by youth whose agenda is outreach to the provinces and service delivery.* Among the national youth-led parties established after the fall of the Taliban, Wadan Afghanistan claims to have the broadest reach and most active provincial councils, particularly in the Pashtun south and east of other Kabul-based parties.²⁰ Although it continues to struggle against the political party stigma and general mistrust of outside entities by potential supporters in the provinces, it appears to have developed more grassroots support in the last half decade, particularly among Pashtuns, than either Rights and Justice or Solidarity of Afghanistan.

Wadan Afghanistan's ideology dates back to the early 1990s. As the country sank deeper into civil war, a group of students from various faculties at Nangarhar University began to publicly demand a paradigm shift to a new, non-mujahideen, nontribal, non-Islamist type of political system.²¹ Wadan sought a democratic system that prioritized outreach to rural youth and had the goal of more direct decision making for the periphery in national politics. This core idea was shelved when the Taliban took control of the country in 1996.

Thirteen years later, the idea of Wadan Afghanistan was resurrected by a student at Kandahar University named Abdul Ahad Mohammadyar after he was beaten by pro-Karzai militias for campaigning for Ashraf Ghani in the 2009 presidential elections.²² Thirty-five individuals from around the country, all of them between eighteen and fifty years of age, began to discuss taking the core principles of Wadan and forming a platform and a party.

Today, Wadan Afghanistan remains unregistered but self-identifies as a political party. Its thirteen-member national leadership council is composed solely of youth. Committee heads and leaders of its six provincial offices are all also drawn exclusively from the younger gen-

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eration. According to Abdul Ahad Mohammadyar, Wadan's main focus is rural areas along a Maoist archetype with the fundamental difference that it does not support land redistribution reforms. "Because the majority of the population lives in the periphery, we prioritize working with them... This is the biggest difference between Wadan and other parties."²³

Given both Taliban and power broker control in the areas where Wadan Afghanistan is strongest, the party is still struggling to develop networks in truly rural district settings. Wadan attracts the type of university-educated and provincial center-based youth who perhaps already belong to another youth organization. These individuals are eager to do positive work within their communities but lack basic funds and are equally wary of getting drawn into a patron-client relationship with a local power broker or with an international organization or funding body. As one member explained, "I joined [Wadan] voluntarily because the strategies and agendas are not made in foreign countries and its leaders and key people do not receive money from abroad. And, most importantly, because the party doesn't discriminate based on tribe or ethnicity."²⁴

Wadan Afghanistan continues to prioritize activities in Pashtun periphery provinces. Although it will need to expand its reach to non-Pashtun areas if it wants to be viewed as something other than a new Afghan Millat, that it has been able to establish itself in Pashtun areas at all is significant given the comparatively high level of insularity, often violent patron-client politics, and level of insurgent control in these provinces.²⁵ What remains to be seen is whether Wadan Afghanistan can seriously position itself not just as a youth outreach movement but also as a true political option for Pashtuns of all ages searching for an affiliation outside the standard dichotomy of the Taliban insurgency on the one hand or pro-government power broker networks on the other. As of early December 2013, Wadan leader Abdul Ahad Mohammadyar stated that the party was still trying to decide whether it would support a candidate or "cast a blank vote."

4. *Those established by the nation's young political elite post-2001, which remain limited in size and reach and are chiefly concerned with driving policy at the national level.* This is the subset that garners the greatest international attention, given the high levels of education among members, location in the capital, and presence of party members in the circles of the diplomatic community, mid-to upper-level Afghan government posts, and international organizations and media.

The primary examples are Afghanistan 1400, Afghanistan Analysis and Awareness (A3), and Afghanistan Forward. Afghanistan 1400 was established in December 2012 and is arguably the fastest growing of these urban elite parties.²⁶ Its politics are progressive and its positions strong on rule of law, women's rights, and supporting the gains of the last decade. However, Afghanistan 1400 is not as much a party as a collection of individuals from a certain class and with a certain level of education. It does not, for instance, plan to support a single presidential candidate, and many of its members are likely to lead campaigns for a number of different candidates.

The same is generally true of A3, which will also not support a single candidate in the upcoming elections. The principal difference between A3 and other elite youth movements is its attempt to position itself more as a think tank than a party. Although it held a number of small outreach activities in and around the capital during the fall of 2013, its members are most often concerned with publishing pieces on current affairs.

If neither of these parties have the support to elect the next president of Afghanistan, they are nonetheless composed of the type of individuals who will manage presidential campaigns and are expected to occupy key positions—ministry spokesmen, deputy ministers, national security council advisors—in any new government. It is from this small group of individuals that a strong presidential candidate may emerge in 2019.

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Provincial

Although groups such as Rights and Justice, Solidarity of Afghanistan, and Wadan Afghanistan have provincial offices, the majority of politically active youth belong to provincial organizations with no links to national parties. At the provincial level, there are few political parties but a wide range of academies, societies, media organizations, and councils that are political in nature. As one member of a youth council in Kandahar remarked, “There are really two types of youth movements: Those established by youth themselves, and those established at the request of some older politician or power broker.”²⁷ In Kandahar, Nangarhar, Balkh, and Herat, certain youth groups are widely recognized as under the control of power brokers. These include Shah Wali Karzai in Kandahar, Gul Agha Sherzai and Haji Zahir Qadir in Nangarhar, regional power broker Ismael Khan and charismatic cleric Mullah Mujib Rahman in Herat, and Atta Mohammed Nur in Balkh.²⁸

Power broker-established youth groups are usually better funded than their counterparts. Also, they appear in some cases to have better ties downward to the district level, are often given access to armed men or connections to tribal leaders who straddle the insurgent-government divide, and can provide safe passage in volatile areas. Power brokers recognize the size of the youth demographic and its skill set—particularly its media savvy. In return, youth groups get small sums for their daily office expenditures, protection, and access to networks.²⁹ The side effect of this relationship is that along with power broker support come power broker feuds and, more generally, a continuation of old-guard politics through the younger generation. As one interviewee from Nangarhar explained, “In Nangarhar, both [Gul Agha] Sherzai and Haji Zahir have their own youth groups, and these groups do what Sherzai and Zahir tell them. When Sherzai and Zahir argue, their groups take to the streets and protest against one another.”³⁰ So, even as jihad-era political parties lose influence among provincial youth, the old style patron-client politics continue within the new generation.

Independent youth groups rely on a range of funds: Many compete for international resources, most often for one-off projects. Some received more structured support from national civil society organizations, including the Sanayee Development Organization in Balkh and Faryab and the National Democratic Institute and United States Institute of Peace. Other groups relied on provincial line departments, such as the especially proactive Ministry of Counternarcotics, or the local private sector, such as the Azizi Bank branch in Kandahar. Both the ministry and private-sector funds were ad hoc and project based. In both cases, the lines between what the government or a business was funding and what was being funded by the power brokers controlling these entities were blurry.

Presently, the politics of government-controlled areas (Kabul and provincial capitals) differs sharply from the politics at the rural district level. The actual number of young Afghans inhabiting rural areas is unknown, and it may well be that the primary political expression in these areas is simply picking up a gun, becoming part of a grassroots religious movement, or joining a violent insurgent group like the Taliban or Hizb-e Islami (Gulbuddin)—groups that may espouse no coherent political agenda but seem the best way to reject the political status quo.

Provinces like Nangarhar, Herat, and Badakshan are home to some of the best-funded, most organized, and fastest growing religiously-oriented youth political groups.

Religious

Although Islamist youth movements were outside the scope of the fieldwork conducted for this report, the research team was told repeatedly that outside Kabul some of the fastest-growing youth political movements were religious. Further interviews with experts in Kabul supported if not confirmed this claim. Provinces like Nangarhar, Herat, and Badakshan are home to some of the best-funded, most organized, and fastest growing religiously-oriented youth political groups.

According to Borhan Osman of the Afghanistan Analysts Network, the rise of young Islamist movements has occurred in part as a result of the political freedom that the international presence has ensured in the post-Taliban era. "These movements are unique in that they are more grassroots than in Afghanistan's past, when you mostly had groups centered around Kabul University during the Jihad."³¹ If youth religious movements are so far proving to be more grassroots than their secular counterparts, they also have similar characteristics and face similar challenges, including reluctance to identify as political parties and a high level of diversity in policy and tactics between groups. According to Osman, three main Islamist political movements in Afghanistan have strong youth followings.

The fastest growing of these religious groups may now be Hizb ut-Tahrir. This UK-based pan-Islamist movement emerged in Afghanistan around 2006 and is considered the most uncompromising of the youth Islamist movements in Afghanistan. Followers believe that democracy is counter to Islam and so advocate against all forms of participation in Afghanistan's system of government. Their rhetoric is the most bellicose of all youth Islamist movements, but they stop short of calling for violent action against the government. Outside Kabul, Hizb ut-Tahrir is strongest in Herat, Badakshan, Kapisa, Panjshir, and Parwan. Government security forces cracked down on Hizb ut-Tahrir before the 2009 presidential elections and may do so again in the run-up to the April elections.

Jamiat Islah (or Ikhwani/Muslim Brotherhood) movements follow the political Islam ideology of Hassan al Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. In Afghanistan, Jamiat Islah is not registered as a political party, largely because its members are fearful of being targeted by the Taliban if they were to formally participate in national politics. Jamiat Islah has established a television station in Herat and popular radio stations in Kabul, Nangarhar, and Kunduz and have a monthly magazine with one of the largest circulations in the country. More recently, Jamiat Islah has relaxed the criteria for joining the party, which has led to a rise in youth membership and the formation of a separate youth wing, Nehad-e Jawanan-e Musalman (Bureau of Muslim Youth), often referred to as Najm for short. This wing may account for up to 90 percent of the total party membership today. In principle, Jamiat Islah calls for an elected government (in contrast to Hizb ut-Tahrir but similar to Hizb-e Islami), but it stands against the upcoming elections on the basis of the presence of international forces and is likewise against a bilateral security agreement with the United States.

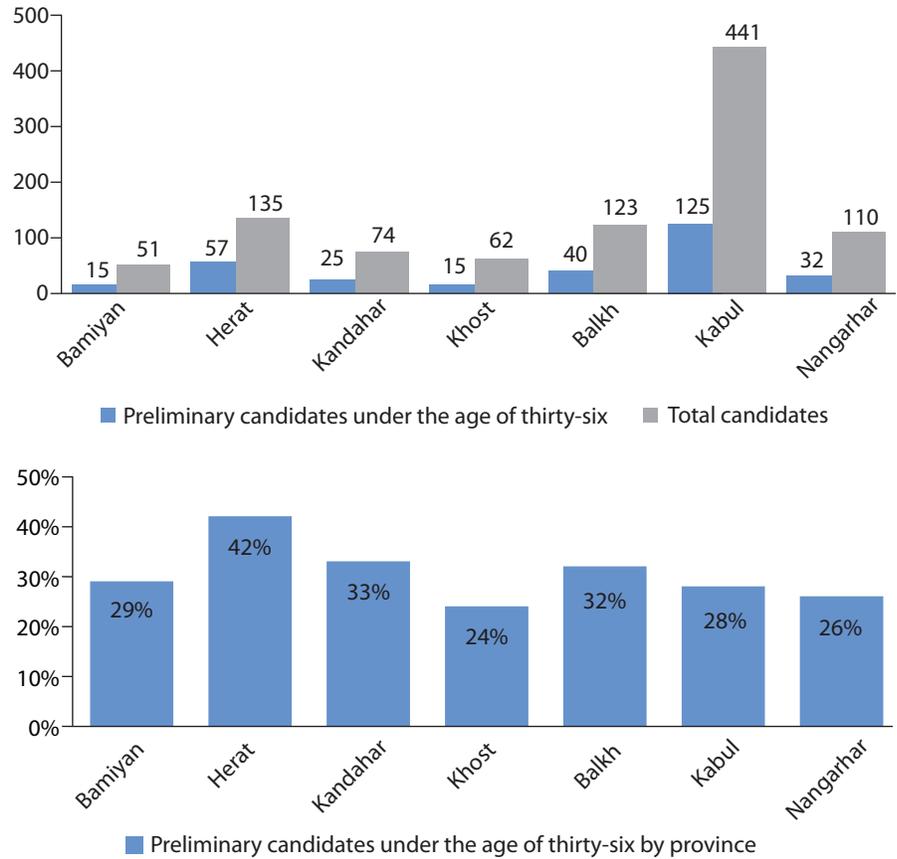
The Hizb-e Islami youth wings form somewhat of a bridge between the registered political party Hizb-e Islami Afghanistan (HIA) and the insurgent faction, Hizb-e Islami Gulbuddin (HIG). Both the insurgent and registered political party have separate youth chapters but the tone, language, and sympathies of both groups are very similar and both meet and hold study groups on the campuses of Kabul and Nangarhar University. More recently, however, the HIA youth chapter has been pressed by its more pragmatic older leadership to back the Abdullah Abdullah presidential ticket on which the HIA head of central office Mohammad Khan is first vice president.³²

Understanding the strength of the demographic, Abdullah Abdullah attended the HIA youth chapter's annual meeting in October 2013. Those present said that the youth were not fully convinced and, as of early December 2013, still viewed Abdullah Abdullah and his Jamiat-e Islami party as "not Islamist enough." Although they had not begun to mobilize, voters in the provinces were still undecided about the elections.

2014 Elections

The main phase of data collection for this report was carried over the summer months of 2013, when it was not clear whether the elections would take place at all and no candidates

Figure 1. Preliminary Provincial Council Candidates



had been announced. It is therefore difficult to draw any conclusions about possible youth voting or participation patterns. In the provinces, the youth group members and political leaders we interviewed were involved in voter education and voter registration initiatives; the provinces of Herat, Bamiyan, and Khost were particularly active. As one member of a youth group from Khost described it in August, “We collected 1000 Afghans from each person who was present in the group’s session to rent a car to go to the villages and gather and take all of those eligible for voting to get their voter identification cards tomorrow.”³³

In November, when a round of follow-up interviews were conducted after candidates had been announced, more enthusiasm for the elections was evident in the provinces than in the capital. This is interesting considering those in Kabul province, and in the city in particular, have arguably benefitted the most from the existing political order and have been least affected by the ongoing insurgency. Common sentiments from Kabul included “Afghans have lost their hope in the elections. We have seen that the past elections have created mistrust among people” and “I will not vote in the upcoming elections, because no one qualifies to become the future president of Afghanistan.”³⁴

Apathy in the capital appeared to be driven by the fact that presidential tickets were mostly collections of jihad-era politicians and warlords. In the seven survey provinces, youth accounted for 39 percent of all preliminary provincial council candidates, from 24 percent in Khost to 42 percent in Herat. The average age of all preliminary provincial council candidates in the seven provinces was forty-one.³⁵

Although youth were excited about the fact that their peers would be participating in provincial-level elections in significant numbers for the first time since the fall of the Taliban, they seemed realistic about the type of youth running for office. For instance, about half of

the forty candidates running for provincial council in Kandahar were seen as instruments of power brokers. Of the remaining twenty, about half had the funds necessary to mount a serious campaign. Of these ten, several youth activists we spoke with said a realistic goal was to have three young, independent progressives elected to the fourteen-person provincial council.³⁶ In Herat, several activists also said their goal was to have three of around twenty young progressive candidates elected to the nineteen-member council.³⁷

These goals would seem within reach, but as of late November little planning among these groups was under way to launch coordinated campaigns to achieve them. As one interviewee summarized it, “The youth in Kandahar have not made any specific plans for the election yet, especially in the rural areas. I still think you will get a majority of youth taking part in the election process but not in any coordinated way.”³⁸ The same was true in Herat and Nangarhar, where the youth we spoke with were involved in election preparations but had not made any plans to back a slate of independent candidates. In Bamiyan, youth had comparatively better networks at the district level because of better security and had organized plans to work through district level teachers, though they faced similar hurdles in terms of limited funds. As one activist said,

The youth want to really have a key role in next elections. We have 488 members in the provincial center and districts of Bamiyan who were active in last elections for public awareness campaign. We are linked to the teachers in all districts. We do not have enough money to go to the districts so in last elections we called to the teachers into the provincial center to guide them about how to encourage voting in their areas.³⁹

Those we interviewed said several interlocking factors were frustrating the formation of a youth bloc. The most commonly cited challenge was the control that power brokers still hold and the inability of new political groups to access the funds necessary to carry out campaigns in areas in which the barrier to entering politics can be very high, particularly regarding conducting effective outreach in insecure areas. One youth group leader summed it up bluntly: “A good friend of mine wanted to run for provincial council, but his parents wouldn’t let him because they couldn’t afford to hire armed guards, and right now it’s too dangerous to run a campaign without protection.”⁴⁰

In addition to continued power broker dominance, chronic insecurity, and limited funds, the new generation of political actors are also mostly unproven. Some who are currently running have shown they can bring wells and retaining walls to their villages by working for or with nongovernmental organizations or the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development. They remain untested, however, in other aspects of Afghan politics, and their ability to even help their own demographic has so far been limited. One university student in Kandahar said, “Actually the old political parties do not have positive records in this province, and the new parties that recently started to work and attract the youths still have not done any programs to promote the young generation.”⁴¹

As of late November, the same appeared to be true at the provincial level regarding unified youth support to presidential candidates. Many youths in provincial centers believe Ashraf Ghani is best qualified to run the country, though many we interviewed also said that they continued to support President Karzai and would vote for whomever the president endorsed, officially or tacitly. According to one Herat city youth group leader,

The youth living in urban areas are well educated, have access to the technologies and governmental services, have the capacity to analyze the political situation of the country, and will vote to the capacity and policy of candidates. For these people, Ashraf Ghani and Zalmay Rasoul are the best candidates.⁴²

Before candidates were announced in October, the mostly progressive and educated youth we interviewed consistently named former ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad as someone they would vote for because of his “strong relationship to other countries” and his “plan to bring peace to the country.” However, when asked to articulate this plan, these supporters

The young progressives understand that they still need individuals from the older generation as entry points into the political arena. From this standpoint, youth are not looking to change the system per se but to gain more entry into the system.

gave only vague answers. The young progressives' attraction to men like Khalilzad seems to lie more in the belief that they represent the new generation rather than any specific defined plan. They understand that they still need individuals from the older generation as entry points into the political arena. From this standpoint, youth are not looking to change the system per se but to gain more entry into the system.

When pressed, even the most educated provincial youth believed that the presidential vote would come down to regional influence, local calculations, and the pull of power brokers. Thus, in Herat, the Sayyaf ticket was considered stronger than the others, given the presence of Herati strongman Ismael Khan as first vice president on Sayyaf's ticket. In Balkh, the youth vote was split between those voting for the Ashraf Ghani ticket—some because he represented the younger generation and others because northern strongman Abul Rashid Dostum is his first vice president—and the Abdullah Abdullah ticket, which has the backing of Balkh governor Atta Mohammed Nur.

The majority of interviewees believed that elections were likely to go to a second round, though few grasped how the possibility of a runoff would affect their vote, if at all. The overall opinion was that the youth would vote, but that theirs would not be a defining vote. "Three or four elections from now we may have started to forget tribalism," the leader of a youth cultural group told us. "Right now we are still children in this regard. Seventy percent of the people living in the districts who go to the polls will vote for whom they are told by their elder or local warlord to vote for."⁴³ Other youth were slightly more optimistic but still realistic about how much influence they would have on the outcome of the 2014 elections. "I think the youth's role in 2014 elections will be low," an activist from Kabul province said, "But in 2019, youth will have an important role in the elections and will start to be able to achieve some of the goals we are now defining after 2019."⁴⁴

Transition

Even from the educated and fairly progressive youth demographic interviewed for this report, misgivings were deep about the transition and the motives of actors on all sides of the conflict—from the international community to the government of Afghanistan and particularly neighboring countries. "The international community will never leave Afghanistan alone because they invested millions of dollars," a respondent from Khost said.⁴⁵ Distrust of international intentions paled in comparison with youth perceptions about the meddling of their immediate neighbors: "The neighboring countries will never allow us to be independent."⁴⁶ Other opinions were more nuanced: In Kandahar, several respondents were happy that international forces had pulled out of the districts but advocated for a continued provincial level presence because "there is a genuine fear of attack by Iran and Pakistan."⁴⁷

Confidence was also considerable, even in some of the most insecure provinces, that international troop withdrawal (especially from the districts) is long overdue and a necessary step toward stability. More than anything, however, the youth we interviewed were confused by the mixed messages they say they are receiving from both the international community and Afghan government leaders. This confusion, and the range of viewpoints and conspiracy theories it was perpetuating, was not noticeably different from the uncertainty that the population at large was feeling as 2013 drew to a close.

Some are convinced that the country is heading toward a period of instability like that following Soviet withdrawal in the late 1980s. The underlying factor, they feel, is not the strength of the insurgency, which was described as losing strength in traditional support zones like Kandahar and Khost, but on the continued weakness of the government and its inability to support the Afghanistan National Security Forces without considerable external

assistance. “My peers do not trust the government,” a respondent from Kabul noted, “and think that after 2014 the situation will be worse. Some think that we will witness another civil war.” Others went further, expressing the belief that their generation would bear the brunt of impending instability.⁴⁸ “We are uncertain about post-2014. There is no guarantee at all. We see youth are the only group that will really be harmed by the conflict and insurgency.”⁴⁹ Among other things, this level of uncertainty was causing some youth in Kabul to put off marriage until after 2015, at which time they felt they would have more clarity on the near-term viability of the state and thus on decisions to emigrate.

Those who felt that transition would ultimately lead to stability were divided about how this would be achieved. Some felt that long-term support and a bilateral security agreement with the United States was necessary. Others advocated a more direct disengagement and a refocusing on internal challenges and relations with immediate neighbors. “Youth, including myself, have a positive opinion toward transition. Afghans don’t want foreigners to lead them. It is true that our economy will go down, but we have to take the lead at some point,” a student from Nangarhar said.⁵⁰ A respondent from Kandahar explained it this way:

We must think about political transition as an exam and an opportunity because our country will act independently and everything will be done by our own people, but in order to pass this political transition successfully, we need to get some preparation, like we must work on a better and cordial relationship with our neighboring countries like Pakistan and also we must review our domestic relationship among the different ethnic groups in Afghanistan.⁵¹

In some of the most unstable provinces—Khost, Nangarhar, Kandahar—fears over the negative impacts of transition are overall less than in more stable provinces, such as Kabul and Bamiyan. In the unstable provinces, youth feel that they have less to lose and would remain in their provinces and attempt to continue their work in some fashion in the event of a Taliban return. “Youth do not see the Taliban as their enemy, but the warlords and their political parties,” one young journalist from Khost said.⁵² In the more stable provinces, youth felt they had more to lose if the Taliban were to return to power, less ability to live and work in their provinces in this event. “Hazara people are concerned about the post-2014 [scenarios] because they are the first people who will be harmed by the withdrawal of foreign troops, then the insurgent groups and the Taliban can easily attack our districts.”⁵³ Even in Bamiyan, however, the main fear is not the return of the Taliban but of communal war between commander networks. “It is a concern among people that NATO is pulling out and the former commanders are arming themselves,” an interviewee explained. “This will have a negative impact on the community once these commanders start fighting when NATO leaves.”⁵⁴

Beyond Transition

The main challenge for politically active youth is bridging the rural-urban divide. In the last half of the twentieth century, Afghan politics have swung widely from Kabul-centered—both leftist and religious parties in the 1960s and 1970s—to village-level mujahideen groups, later Taliban, and their rural constituencies. Both movements were lopsided. Today, youth organizations and political parties have the same lopsided tendencies—individual youths may maintain contact with rural areas, but as groups and as political movements there is little coordination or outreach from the capital to the provinces, especially from the provincial center to the districts. At present, those groups that appear to be bridging this divide the best are the religious movements with strong youth components. Other than power broker-sponsored groups, which are most active around election time, district-level political activity was limited in the provinces studied here. “If people want to be politically

active, they leave the districts,” one Kandahar city-based youth group leader explained. “There is no real grassroots political movements at the district level.”⁵⁵

Communication

The inability to forge linkages is preventing the consolidation of youth political movements and allowing the continuation of old-guard politics at every level. The role that technology can play in bridging this gap is partial at best. Some estimates indicate between ten and fifteen million mobile phone users in Afghanistan today. Youth political leaders also repeatedly cited the widespread use of cellular phones in provincial centers as the principle means of staying in touch with possible constituents and mobilizers at the district and village level. “Youth like modern technology nowadays, for example, a shepherd listens to music through his mobile phone. Even illiterate people use modern technology,” a Khost city-based journalist noted.⁵⁶ Although we found that youth groups in provincial centers were communicating with youth in the districts (often uneducated or illiterate youth) via cell phones, they did so on a one-to-one basis for basic information sharing and mobilization purposes. The use has not advanced to any strategic level or mass outreach campaigns.

Many provincial youth groups have established Facebook pages and Twitter feeds and other social media tools to share ideas and to organize, but these initiatives have not yet spurred any definite political linkages either up to the national level or down in to the districts, where Internet and smart phone penetration is still limited. Youth based in provincial centers better understand the limits of information technology systems than their counterparts in Kabul. Those we spoke with in the provinces grasp that technology alone is not enough to establish meaningful networks, but that personal groundwork needs to be laid first and only then should technology be introduced to leverage these personal ties—that, in other words, even if every village were today equipped with Wi-Fi, a shift toward more open and progressive politics would not necessarily come to pass, merely—and more likely—a more robust continuation of patron-client relations.

Provincial youth understand that their power relative to the older generation is largely a result of their mastery of media—not just new media but more basic things such as being able to give a television interview. In the east and the southeast, youth have grabbed a greater share of power within local media—particularly by becoming radio, television, and print journalists—than they have in the south.⁵⁷ Some of these politically active youth have established their own mostly low-frequency radio stations, but the by-and-large provincial media are still controlled either by power brokers (such as the Karzai family-owned Hewad television in Kandahar) or by religious organizations or individuals.

Education, Income, and Institutional Reforms

Many youths advocated for institutional government reforms—principally creating a full youth ministry rather than the current department within the Ministry of Information and Culture. However, even more said that education, technical training, and job creation are the priority and that institutional reforms at this stage would mean little to youth given the weakness of the government in general. As one female interviewee from Nangarhar who was barred by her family from joining a political party said, “We don’t have as many legal limitations as we have social limitations.”⁵⁸ This sentiment was echoed by others in Nangarhar as well who said that their province had become more socially conservative in recent years.

Respondents were then divided over the role the government should (or could) play in educational and economic issues. A segment of youth in all provinces believed that job creation is the government’s main responsibility after the restoration of security and that in practice this means using international funds for large-scale public works that would put

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the currently underemployed younger generation to work on projects from unskilled manual labor to those requiring engineering degrees or that the government should lower the retirement age to open up more jobs within the bureaucracy to the younger generation.

In terms of education, respondents identified the government as often part of the problem. In Kandahar, respondents said that tribal differences were still defining politics in part because the history taught in government schools reinforced these divisions.

From first class to the end of high school the curriculum teaches us divisions between the Durrani and the Ghilzai. They talk about when one group was on top and when the other got power, rather than speaking in terms of the rulers and the years, they talk about the whole communities.

In a province like Kandahar, characterized by an intermixing of Ghilzai tribes and ruling Durrani from tribes such as Popalzai and the Mohammadzai, youth say this zero-sum historical perspective perpetuates tribalism in things like politics and government and security-sector appointments both within greater Kandahar (Kandahar, Uruzgan, Helmand, Zabul) and between greater Kandahar and Ghilzai majority provinces in the east.⁵⁹

Refreshingly, the majority of those interviewed were less concerned with international support in the form of goods, infrastructure, or core funding for their organizations and more concerned with specific skills training for capacity building within the organization or curriculum and Trainer of Trainer programs which they could push down the district levels. They were equally wary of just “holding workshops” and said that skills training needed to be paired with small-scale follow-on projects.⁶⁰

Stability

More than jobs, schooling, and Internet accessibility in the villages, the viability of the nascent progressive youth politics in Afghanistan depends on ensuring stability above all else. In the near-term, the level of uncertainty about the transition period means that individuals able to dispense patronage in the form of physical protection and basic income will continue to call the shots politically. Because most youth fundamentally understand this state of affairs, what they are asking for is not revolution but breathing room. Even if they retain the vestiges of their fathers’ politics, youth need to be spared actually returning to the ethno-political war footing of the early 1990s.

The success of the fledgling political movements and organizations that seek to move beyond the old-guard political systems depends primarily on preventing a bigger civil war or Taliban rule. So, despite a laundry list of needs specific to the younger generation, losing sight of the immediate national needs of a successful transfer of power in the next elections, a long-term economic and security agreement with the West, and an earnest peace and reconciliation process with the insurgency are necessary preconditions for youth political movements to take root and positively affect Afghanistan’s political landscape. A return to the status quo ante would set back the next generation—the sons and the daughters of the current youth political leaders—on whom much hope now rests.

37. These “young progressives” were described as those who had been encouraged to run for provincial council by their communities after demonstrating an ability to bring services down to the district level. Past political affiliation or membership in a newly formed youth group did not seem to matter. In many cases, these individuals have simply been effective project officers implementing NSP or USAID projects and understood how to navigate the aid/development system effectively and with a minimum of corruption (Interview, Kandahar, November 2013).
38. Interview, Kandahar Province, August 2013.
39. Interview, Bamiyan Province, July 2013.
40. Interview, Kandahar Province, November 2013.
41. Interview, Kandahar Province, August 2013.
42. Interview, Herat Province, December 2013.
43. Interview, Kandahar Provinces, November 2014. The percentage quoted by this individual is his personal estimate and not derived from published statistics.
44. Interview, Kabul Province, September 2013.
45. Interview, Khost Province, October 2013.
46. Interview, Kabul Province, September 2013.
47. Interview, Kandahar Province, November 2013.
48. Interview, Kabul Province, September 2013.
49. Interview, Kabul Province, September 2013.
50. Interview, Nangarhar Province, September 2013.
51. Interview, Kandahar Province, August 2013.
52. Interview, Khost Province, October 2013.
53. Interview, Bamiyan Province, July 2013.
54. Interview, Bamiyan Province, July 2013.
55. Interview, Bamiyan Province, July 2013.
56. Interview, Khost Province, October 2013.
57. Interview, Kandahar Province, November 2013.
58. Interview, Nangarhar Province, September 2013.
59. Interview, Kandahar Province, November 2013.
60. Interview, Kandahar Province, August 2013.

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