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SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report explores the nature of political legitimacy and elections in Afghanistan—building on previous fieldwork, interviews, and seven years of longitudinal data to demonstrate increasing local frustrations with Afghanistan’s National Unity Government. It continues ongoing research and programming by the United States Institute of Peace on transparent elections and rule of law in Afghanistan.

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Anna Larson and Noah Coburn

Afghan Views of Government and Elections Legitimacy Pending

Summary

- The contested 2014 Afghan presidential elections, the delayed parliamentary elections originally scheduled for 2015, and the failure to implement real electoral reform thus far in the country suggest serious challenges for electoral democracy and the perceived legitimacy of Afghanistan’s National Unity Government.
- Research on changes in perceptions of government in three urban Afghan sites points to a widening gap between the public and the ruling government-connected elite, who are considered to have fewer incentives now than during the Karzai regime to support communities with development initiatives, infrastructure projects, or other resources.
- Community members view the current government and parliament as unresponsive to their needs. Local leaders are now perceived as doing little other than attempting to shore up their own resources and influence.
- These trends have been exacerbated by the widely held perception that international funds are likely to continue to decrease. The related assumption is that this belief is driving leaders to act quickly to seize what they can but to spend little time on improving governance.
- Despite this situation, few respondents had any desire to replace elections, implying that an unelected government would be widely considered illegitimate and that elections continue to be the desired and necessary form of government structuring.
- All this suggests that elections—and parliamentary and provincial council ones in particular—have in some areas across the country added to existing mechanisms of keeping local leaders accountable, even if only in providing a stage for a performance of superficial promises.

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- Holding parliamentary elections—with reforms or otherwise—will not prove a panacea to restoring or establishing downward accountability, however. Instead, government legitimacy is likely to come only through a combination of transformative, top-down electoral reform led by the NUG, public protest, and international diplomatic pressure.

Introduction

In the thirteen years since the first presidential elections in Afghanistan, voters across the country have had different experiences of polls and their results. Despite regional and local variations and widespread accusations and perceptions of fraud, the presidential elections of 2004 and parliamentary elections of 2005 generally generated great (if unrealistic) optimism for the potential for new connections between local communities and central government.¹ The elections brought to light differing expectations among the public as to what the role of elected representatives and other local leaders should be.² Providing goods and services to communities has been central to these expectations, and thus to proving the legitimacy of representatives. A local leader perceived to have brought a development project to the area with international funds was seen as legitimate as one who relied on patronage networks to secure government jobs for local residents. But the perceived gap between citizens and government appears to have widened since Afghanistan's first elections, and especially since those of 2014.

Interviews conducted at the time revealed a variety of public responses, including disappointment with the unwillingness of the government to announce the official results of that contest, even after UN monitors had recounted all eight million ballots, but also relief at the end of a six-month political stalemate, and some optimism as to the potential for the two frontrunners and their supporters to form a government at the national level. Such optimism was to be short lived: many political decisions stalled because of disagreements between President Ashraf Ghani and CEO Abdullah Abdullah. Yet, though international and Afghan analysts have emphasized the current political stalemate at the national level, far less attention has been paid to changes in local voter attitudes toward elites and to shifting ideas about political legitimacy at the local level. This report suggests that more than at any other point during the last thirteen years, communities are disaffected by local elites in spite, and perhaps because of, their connections to the central government. At a time when local disdain for elite politics is having a significant impact globally, exploring the implications of voter dissatisfaction with the National Unity Government (NUG) in Afghanistan is particularly important.

This report examines local attitudes toward elites, elections, and political changes in Afghanistan over the last decade. Fifty semi-structured interviews were conducted over three months in the summer and fall of 2016 among voters in two geographical areas and among a group of student voters at Kabul University. These areas and groups—a relatively small sample and certainly not representative of Afghanistan—were selected to allow a comparative perspective of perception change over time. Respondents from a variety of ethnic and geographical backgrounds were included to provide a sense of youth concerns with the current political landscape. Taken together, the material from these interviews raises questions about the perceived legitimacy of the current government.³

The tendency among leaders since 2014 to deliver opportunities and resources locally is seen as having decreased, as has the sense that they are concerned whether they do so. The perception appears related to the continuing postponements of the 2015 parliamentary

elections and the failure of parliamentarians to push for reform. Such condescension and complacency in parliamentarians and other leaders are undermining their legitimacy, arguably more now than at any point over the last sixteen years. Official attitudes toward local communities may well affect the NUG's ability to maintain political control and influence.

Elections History, 2004–2017

Although two rounds of parliamentary elections were held in the 1960s under the monarchy, it was the Bonn Accord after the US-led invasion in 2001 that ushered in real hopes of a democratic system of government under an elected president. Starting with the country's first presidential election in 2004, and both parliamentary and provincial council elections in 2005, elections have seen higher voter turnout than many skeptics have predicted: approximately one-quarter to one-third of Afghans have voted—often in insecure circumstances—to select their representatives.⁴ Accusations of fraud, corruption, and manipulation have marred the entire voting process, though the 2009 presidential elections saw a dramatic increase in accusations of malfeasance. These accusations were particularly acute before the scheduled second round of voting between incumbent Hamid Karzai and Abdullah Abdullah, the second-highest vote getter. Abdullah, however, pulled out of the race before this second round took place, leaving many feeling that the process was seriously flawed. The 2010 parliamentary elections also generated high levels of fraud, and controversies over the results caused a year-long delay in seating the new parliament.

Most recently, the 2014 presidential elections were successful in that they allowed for a transfer of power from the Karzai regime that has (thus far) been peaceful, but at the same time a remarkable failure in that the precise final vote counts were not initially publicized and remain privately disputed by the two governing camps. Because neither leading candidate, Ashraf Ghani nor Abdullah Abdullah, secured a majority in the first round, a constitutionally mandated second round was scheduled and took place. However, the counting of this second round was repeatedly interrupted by accusations of fraud, threats by both candidates to leave the process, and threats of violence by supporters of both candidates. The intervention of US Secretary of State John Kerry led to the most comprehensive recount process ever overseen by the United Nations, in which all eight million ballots were recounted. Yet the full results of this recount were released only in 2016 and detailed results, including by geographic area for example, have still not been announced. Instead, Kerry brokered a deal between Ghani and Abdullah, giving Ghani the presidency and Abdullah a new position called chief executive officer, and establishing the NUG.⁵ In the agreement, both parties agreed to substantial electoral reform and to hold a constitutional Loya Jirga to determine the formal structure of the new government within two years. Three years later, however, few reforms have been implemented. Parliamentary elections scheduled for 2015 have been delayed repeatedly (and are now tentatively scheduled for 2018) and questions are being raised about the ability of the NUG to rule Afghanistan in the face of ongoing insurgency.

Nationally, multiple rounds of voting since 2005 have established a role for elections within Afghan politics—and indeed a role for Afghan politics within elections. Elites use elections not only to secure power, but also to shape local attitudes about political participation. Despite the challenges of earlier votes, respondents interviewed on several occasions over the last decade have been adamant that elections are the only acceptable way to establish a government. This process, combined with government posts functioning as reliable positions from which to extract vast resources from the internationally sponsored government, has meant that influential local figures have sought to supplement the legitimacy they have held with a parliamentary seat on the strength of their military past

Influential local figures have sought to supplement the legitimacy they have held with a parliamentary seat on the strength of their military past or family or religious credentials.

or family or religious credentials. Until recently, funds extracted from lucrative government contracts and personal connections in central government have been valuable to elites as a way to demonstrate strength and develop provincial support bases.

Related to the high value attributed by incumbent and would-be parliamentarians on seats in the Wolesi Jirga, or lower house, and (usually to a lesser extent) provincial councils, each round of voting has brought more sophisticated forms of fraud and elites have become increasingly invested in the manipulation of elections.⁶ Thus campaigns are now perceived by community members to be prohibitively expensive for anyone without access to significant resources, which in turn, according to interviewees, has led to fewer nonelite candidates being successful in securing parliamentary or provincial council seats.

Controlling Resources Locally

Because the drawdown of international troops from 150,000 in 2011 to the current range of ten to twenty thousand and the decline in aid funds have meant fewer resources in many areas, elites have scrambled to monopolize control over those resources that are available. Respondents felt that fewer avenues were available for ordinary Afghans in many local communities to access resources. Although the government remains a large employer nationally, the perception remains that it is only through elite connections that one can secure even a low-level position. This in turn has led to a rather one-sided tug of war in which members of the public have attempted to hold authorities more accountable, and elites, particularly those in government positions, have used their political muscle to preserve the status quo.

A clear example at the national level has been parliament's disinterest in encouraging the electoral reforms necessary to hold parliamentary elections, delaying the polls and preserving the positions of all those who currently have seats. The government has set up a new body, the Independent Electoral Commission, but these steps have been agonizingly slow and sharply criticized by both former electoral officials and members of civil society, who suggest that neither members of the current NUG nor the parliament have any real desire for reform.⁷

More generally, initial hope was that the NUG would implement a series of wider reforms once in office and commit to removing from power corrupt officials. In reality, this process largely stalled despite the removal of many such officials. Respondents linked the failure to the way in which the NUG set-up has promoted executive gridlock and monopolization of government resources by the ruling elite on both a national and local level, contributing to local skepticism about the commitment of leaders to reform.

This struggle between the public to hold leaders accountable and leaders to preserve their positions takes different forms depending on local conditions, such as the presence of the Taliban or specific ethnic grievances. But in each area where research was conducted, voters have pointed to a widening gap between the public and the ruling government-connected elite, who since 2014 are considered less likely to support local development projects or even visit local communities than ever before.

The elite are considered less likely to support local development projects than ever before.

Legitimacy

These perspectives raise serious questions about the nature of political legitimacy in Afghanistan—how it has changed over time and how it is defined differently by and within communities. Political legitimacy can mean different things in different contexts. International analyses have often suffered from the tendency to make Western assumptions, such as equating first-past-the-post electoral victories to a broad-based public consensus that Afghans consider these victories legitimate, when making political assessments in

Afghanistan. Over the past seven years, however, we have tracked the ways in which Afghans believe that the government is supposed to operate in response to their needs and where it is fulfilling those demands.⁸ For respondents in this study and previous research, the themes of predictability and adherence to a basic social contract between leaders and ordinary Afghans have been central to descriptions of legitimate political processes. This unwritten contract often involves the expectation of personal provision by elected representatives of government and privately funded services and development projects to the communities from which they come. Also, as Andrew Wilder predicted after the first round of post-intervention parliamentary and provincial council elections, legitimacy has often been determined through performance in office rather than simply the ways in which candidates were elected to office in the first place.⁹

Elections have become an embedded part of the Afghan political process. Almost none of those interviewed had any desire to replace them with an alternative method of selecting representation, implying that an unelected government would be widely considered illegitimate. Yet, in previous rounds of voting, we found that the ability to gather support through what are generally considered in the West to be illegitimate methods, such as the threat of violence or vote buying, were thought by some voters to be acceptable within the context of an election and did not necessarily delegitimize the candidates who used these methods.¹⁰ Indeed, we found that widespread corruption and fraud in the 2009 elections did more to undermine the legitimacy of the United States and the international community than of the implicated Afghan political leaders because of the international community's sponsorship and perceived involvement in the implementation of the elections and the counting of ballots.¹¹ When talking broadly about the legitimacy of leaders, respondents often discuss the ways in which leaders do or do not provide resources to local communities; their personal accessibility; and their political history and involvement in the jihad against the Soviets, the civil war, and in more recent political events.

When considering political legitimacy in Afghanistan, it is important to consider the ways in which international perspectives on political legitimacy in the country's political processes have been not only simplistic and selective, but also contradictory and confused. Holding up an ideal of electoral democracy during the Bonn process, international diplomats have worked to preserve and promote democratic processes. However, in the eyes of most Afghan interviewees, these actors have inadvertently undermined their stated commitments to establishing legitimate government through elections. Interventions in the outcomes of presidential races in both 2009 and 2014, and more generally the application of internationals' shifting standards for acceptable levels of fraud, have led many Afghans to believe rumors about external manipulation and deals between foreign powers and the Afghan ruling elite.

International actors' definitions of political legitimacy are also ambiguous. In 2004 and 2005, some agreed on the need to disqualify candidates with gross human rights abuse records, but at the same time allowed most of the key ethnic group and former mujahideen faction leaders to stand for election. As one Kabul academic interviewed by the International Crisis Group in 2004 explained, "The Bonn Agreement empowered militia commanders. People who had no legitimacy in the eyes of the people, people who had failed the state, were brought back into the political process."¹² Yet in spite of this, international actors pay little attention to the impact of international intervention on the domestic political legitimacy of individual leaders and of the government. A lack of consistency has characterized the international approach to legitimacy throughout the intervention and thus it is not surprising that Afghan voters regularly talk about the way in which elections have helped delegitimize the international community.

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Communities in Contention

These analyses of local politics in Dasht-e Barchi and Nangarhar, and among students at Kabul University, examine how voters have responded to changing political structures over the last decade, the actions and attitudes of local government-affiliated elites, voter perceptions, and respondents' views on prospects for the future.

Dasht-e Barchi

Dasht-e Barchi is the suburb of western Kabul that spans police districts six and thirteen. With a rapidly increasing population, largely composed of Hazara communities that have migrated from the central highlands over the last fifty years, Dasht-e Barchi is now almost a city in its own right: population estimates are between one to two million inhabitants. Sorely lacking in services, however, the area has only one central paved road, limited electricity and water supplies, and underdeveloped infrastructure relative to other parts of Kabul city. Known instead, at least until recently, for its myriad private educational institutes and property dealers, the area at once reflects the vastly expanding youth population of Afghanistan and the value of land in the capital city.

Afghanistan's Hazara community has experienced sustained persecution in the past and is often portrayed as a minority group making the most of new opportunities since 2001. Hazaras have focused in particular on education and seen substantial upward mobility from the oppression they experienced under previous regimes. Beyond the vast numbers of educational institutes in Dasht-e Barchi, the community has also mobilized actively around elections and other political issues to a greater extent than some other minority groups.¹³ Turnout in Dasht-e Barchi specifically but also in Hazara areas across the country has typically been very high since the presidential election in 2004, many communities reporting a shortage in ballot papers on election day, for example, and some commentators viewing this as significant disenfranchisement.¹⁴ Nevertheless, over the last decade, Hazara representation in parliament has been high, increasing from thirty-nine members of parliament (16 percent of the total 249 seats) elected in 2005 to forty-five (18 percent) in 2010.¹⁵ Not insignificantly, in 2010 this included all eleven seats for Ghazni, a province whose population is roughly split between Hazara and Pashtun residents, but where voting in Pashtun areas in 2010 was limited due to poor security.¹⁶

This increase in political representation is in some way related to the relatively well-sustained influence of two key leaders, Mohammed Mohaqqueq, now deputy chief executive officer, and Karim Khalili, a former vice president, who served two terms under Hamid Karzai. Across the country, Hazara loyalty to one of these two leaders has remained relatively strong. In a strategic move probably intended as a show of strength rather than a bid for the presidency, Mohaqqueq ran as a candidate for presidential elections in 2004 and came in third with 935,000 votes, 11.7 percent of the total votes cast, behind the Tajik Yunus Qanooni and Pashtun Hamid Karzai. During parliamentary elections, both Mohaqqueq and Khalili advertised a number of their own "chosen" candidates alongside pictures of themselves, the message being "a vote for any one of these candidates is a vote for me." Although it is not a technique exclusive to Hazara candidates, they certainly used it extensively during the 2005, 2009, and 2010 parliamentary and provincial council contests.

This said, disaffection with these established leaders among Hazara youth, and particularly in urban Dasht-e Barchi, has been growing over the years and was particularly acute during the most recent rounds of interviews. Interviewees pointed to several key reasons for political dissatisfaction. Failure of service delivery to the area, particularly because key leaders such as Mohaqqueq and Khalili have been increasingly perceived as co-opted by

government, was the key complaint. Other issues outside the areas were also cited, such as failure to address land conflicts between Hazaras and the nomad Kuchi population in the central highlands, and the assumption of the unilateral representation of Hazara needs and interests, with little downward accountability.

This dissatisfaction has fueled the rise of several alternative political movements among Hazaras. In particular, it has been manifest in the setting up of unaligned “cultural” organizations for Hazara youth, dissatisfaction among the second-tier leadership in the two main parties of Mohaqqueq and Khalili, and the formation of new political parties such as Ensejam-e Milli. In part driven by these groups, the number of peaceful demonstrations has risen, as has the popularity of new, younger individuals in politics, such as parliamentarian Jafar Mahdawi. Most recently, the formation of the Jombesh-e Roshnayi (Enlightenment movement), scathing in its critique of the government’s lack of security provision for its own protesters who were massacred by an Islamic State bomber in July 2016, has highlighted the potential political clout of Hazara youth.

This movement began as an attempt to pressure the government into changing the route of the Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan power line through the country so that it would pass through Bamiyan province and provide electricity directly to the population there. In the first instance, the movement included establishment figures such as Mohaqqueq and Sarwar Danish, the former minister of justice and current second vice president. After discussions with the president, and a compromise to ease ethnic tensions that included the formation of a commission to review the decision to route the power line through the Salang pass and not Bamiyan, eventually resulted in the promise of a separate 220 KV power line for Bamiyan province.

Even the Enlightenment movement’s most fervent supporters, however, have not expressed the intention to destabilize or attempt to replace the NUG. Nevertheless, the manifestation of this movement in Kabul is partly indicative of the deep-seated discontent of the younger generation in Dasht-e Barchi with the complacency of established leaders in their assumed roles as representatives.¹⁷ These views also imply a discontent with the ways in which elites have managed elections to preserve the political status quo.

Perceptions of elections in Dasht-e Barchi were consistent across respondents, regardless of age, and reflected concerns (albeit now stronger and more urgent) noted in the area since the presidential election in 2009. Voters were quite concerned about levels of fraud and the involvement of government authorities in manipulating results. All respondents supported the introduction of electronic voter registration cards to help reduce fraud, although most were skeptical about the government’s ability to implement it ahead of the parliamentary elections and many questioned the willingness of the NUG to hold elections at all. Responses to questions about likely participation, should the elections go ahead, were mixed: for some, the inevitable levels of fraud were a complete deterrent; for others, it was important to cast a vote regardless. Nevertheless, all respondents in Dasht-e Barchi considered elections the only way to select the country’s political leaders.

Respondents were reluctant to comment on Afghanistan’s political future going forward. In Dasht-e Barchi, more than any other area where interviews were conducted, respondents brought up the idea of emigrating to Europe, Australia, or elsewhere, albeit as a last resort and an option not easily followed through on.¹⁸ Although Afghans have often expressed skepticism over the last decade when asking people to talk about the future of the country, with a great deal of uncertainty preventing people from wanting to make fixed plans or predictions, it appears that political and economic uncertainty continues to escalate and, until recently, has contributed to the growing numbers of Dasht-e Barchi residents choosing to leave the country. This said, the Enlightenment movement’s attempt to take matters

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into its own hands and demonstrate outright defiance to an uncertain future suggests some confidence in the public's ability to influence government through publicly organized protest. Opposing voices within the community—those who consider influencing government programs, policies, and elite attitudes toward Dasht-e Barchi residents possible, and those who have lost hope in their ability to do so—are making themselves heard.

Nangarhar

The eastern province of Nangarhar is home to the city of Jalalabad and the crucial Torkham pass border crossing with Pakistan. Partly because of its importance as a trade route, the province has experienced fluctuating insurgent activity in some districts over the past decade as well as areas of economic growth. During the jihad and civil wars, the province vacillated between periods of stability and occasionally intense fighting, its ethnic and tribal diversity contributing to political factionalization. In more recent years, largely because of its strategic location and economic importance, Nangarhar has received significant international aid and private investment, particularly during the surge years. Its former governor, Gul Agha Sherzai, invested in provincial infrastructure and development projects, in part through funds collected in unofficial rents at the border and in part through his ability to influence landownership in the province during a period that saw frequent land grabs by local leaders.¹⁹ At times seemingly deferential to Kabul and yet largely perceived as an independent actor, interviewees reported, Sherzai influenced resource flows in the province, causing resentment among voters. But despite the corruption for which he was well known, Sherzai's ability to extract resources from the Karzai administration for the general benefit of the province was also seen as an asset. Some pointed to his undue influence on politics, including the electoral process in the province, but the sense was also that Sherzai—as one of a number of powerful elites in the province—contributed to maintaining a stable balance between the various competing factions in the province while ensuring the continuation of several key internationally sponsored development projects. He stepped down as governor to contest the 2014 presidential elections but later withdrew his intention to stand.

Elections in Nangarhar have been hotly contested over the years, perhaps none more so than the 2009 provincial council elections, in which results were delayed for four months, greatly shaping continuing perceptions of elections more generally. Interviewees recalled the elite competition to Sherzai's rule following the 2009 vote—the provincial council had been traditionally split between Sherzai's followers and his opponents—and the sense was widespread that the results were being discussed and decided upon behind closed doors. As one respondent at the time remarked, "The Prophet Mohammad said that three things are always unknown: death, doomsday and the soul. Nowadays, however, people say that four things are always unknown: those three and the results of the [provincial council] elections." This respondent went on to blame international actors for intervening and changing the results, although other voters interviewed pointed to Sherzai's involvement and that of other elite individuals in the province. These experiences shaped voter expectations going into more recent rounds of voting.

Perhaps because of the high level of international development funding the province was allocated in the surge years, respondents for this report consistently noted a considerable, sharp decline in infrastructure and other development projects allocated to the province in the past two years as the presence of the international military decreased. Contributing to these economic issues has been the increased urbanization of Jalalabad, which has also seen an influx of repatriated Afghan refugees, all adding to growing unemployment and a sense of economic despair. As one respondent explained, "Under the previous government, I think many projects and many NGOs were active in the area and it was possible for some

people to find jobs working on these projects, but under the current government, fewer organizations are working in Nangarhar and even if they are active they are not hiring new people.” This widely held perspective is having an impact on the perceived legitimacy of the government. Given a sharp drop in the tangible and visible provision of development resources to the province, it is easy to point to the electoral outcome and hold the NUG responsible. Without exception, respondents talked about what was commonly referred to as the two-headed government (the NUG, led by Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah) and the inefficacy of dual leadership. Most respondents blamed the double government rather than Ghani himself, and suggested that, had he been elected outright, Ghani would have been able to bring about greater delivery of services. Respondents reflected on the relative disenfranchisement they now experienced as compared with their previous connection to central government through Hamid Karzai.

Locally, respondents suggested, power in the province has become more divided between various groups since the 2014 elections. The Taliban has established control of areas of certain districts and Daesh (the self-proclaimed Islamic State movement as it is referred to in Afghanistan) is stronger here than in any other part of the country.²⁰ Several respondents described how Daesh had recently been recruiting among students at Nangarhar University, suggesting that the group appeals in particular to youth who have poor employment prospects. Still, those interviewed reserved their harshest criticism not for the violent activities of Daesh but instead for local “mafia” figures, who often have backgrounds as militia leaders but have become involved both in local business as well as government. For example, the timber industry was one area that respondents pointed to that was heavily controlled by these figures. Logging in areas purportedly regulated by the government could be done in exchange for kickbacks to those officials meant to oversee the process. This had led to an increasing intertwining between these officials and those attempting to exploit the weakness and corruption in government. It suggests that the government is more undermined by visible corruption, such as local logging, than by larger-scale but less tangible fraud, such as the Kabul Bank scandal.

The failure to replace corrupt local officials or discipline other leaders who engaged in illegal activities was perceived by many to further demonstrate the weakness of the national and local governments. In one rather widely discussed example, Haji Farooq, notorious for land grabbing, was singled out by Ashraf Ghani on a visit to the province. Haji Farooq was arrested, but then, after Ghani had left the province, promptly released. Several respondents suggested that this simply showed how local government officials were afraid of being fired, so followed Ghani’s orders initially, but were more concerned about retaliation by Farooq and so released him as soon as they could.

Such episodes were pointed to as evidence of the ineffective nature of the NUG and the electoral process more generally. As one interviewee explained, “It is a very negative tradition established in Afghanistan; if you lose, you will not accept the result and instead will make deals with the opposition.” Still, most felt that elections were the way that power was supposed to facilitate political transitions, but also felt that without reform or more accountability, it was likely for current leaders to continue to abuse the system. In addition, although abuse of the system was grudgingly tolerated by Nangarharis under Sherzai’s rule, due to the way in which the resources were distributed according to known, if unwritten, arrangements—now, with unfamiliar new officials being coopted by mafia families, these arrangements are less predictable and less accessible than before, and officials are now perceived as rarely deigning to meet with those attempting to consult them. This has left ordinary residents excluded and less connected to government than before, having a gen-

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eral sense that little could be done to influence government to become more responsive to local needs.

Kabul University

Conducting interviews among young people at Kabul University allowed a contrast with the geographically oriented approach of the other two sites (approximately one-third of the interviews were conducted at each site). The Concours entrance exam, which is much criticized and often seen as corrupt, still creates a student body that includes a large number of urban youth from wealthy families, but also a good number of students from poorer, rural backgrounds. This on one level made results more difficult to assess, given that respondents originated from different areas across the country, but it was useful in that these young respondents all struggled to assert themselves politically in a system where, despite their numerical advantage, young people have been greatly underrepresented.

Although Afghanistan's patriarchal political culture often emphasizes the importance of older men, youth political mobilization has a history in Afghanistan, particularly around Kabul University, which students referenced in their reflections. Early versions of youth activism in Afghanistan included the Afghan-e Jawan (Young Afghans), led by noted reformer and editor Mahmud Beg Tarzi in the early twentieth century. By the 1960s and 1970s, Kabul University increasingly became seen as a site for developing youth activism. During this period, parties developed on the left supporting Maoism and other communist philosophies, and on the right around conservative Islamic ideologies, but no progovernment parties were established. The leaders of these parties, such as Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and the professors supplying them with ideological backing, such as Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, would come to dominate the Afghan political world in the decades that followed.

Following the US-led invasion, the university's place in the higher education landscape has shifted somewhat because numerous private universities, including the American University of Afghanistan, are now alternatives to Kabul University. This change has been assisted in part by rumors of corruption around the nationwide exam that determines who gains admission to government universities. Still, the university is an important place for youth activism and has been the site of several large-scale protests in recent years. Interviews with students around the campus emphasized both continuities in the political interests of young people over the last seven years, such as the need for better education and employment opportunities across the country, but also growing concerns about their individual places in Afghanistan's increasingly uncertain political and economic future, as well as resentment about a political elite that is seen as increasingly unresponsive.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, in their reflections on elections, students were less likely than respondents in other areas to have kept abreast of local political changes in their home districts since the NUG was established. For some students, instability made it difficult for them to return home often. One student from Ghazni, for example, had not been home in several years because of Taliban activity in his district. Although students blamed the Taliban and other insurgent groups for much of the ongoing instability in the country, they were largely critical of the NUG and the international community for the decline in funding for local development projects in recent years and were particularly critical about the failure to advance infrastructure projects, such as roads and dams. Young people were also discouraged by the lack of focus on education, and brought up the issue of "ghost" schools and teachers, which had technically been paid for by international funds, but did not exist in reality so that local officials could skim off the salaries.

Contributing to local instability are tensions over how resources have been divided locally, particularly along ethnic lines. As one student explained, "On [the] provincial level,

favoritism based on tribe and ethnicity is [a] serious challenge for the government in Ghazni. Even... now as soon as a baby is born they are taught to think about ethnicity and day by day it is getting to be a more serious issue. At the same time, our leaders know this and they are using ethnic clashes and conflict as politics to gain more power through these divides.”

Politics within the university are also highly ethnicized. Routinely, interviewees accused professors of favoring students from their own ethnic group. Hazaras were particularly singled out for being overrepresented on campus. The perceived high percentage of Hazaras at Kabul University was attributed to their hard work (by Hazara respondents) or for corruption within the Ministry of Higher Education (by non-Hazara respondents).

The emphasis on ethnicity was interpreted by many students—particularly given that they had no memory of Afghanistan before the civil war of the 1990s—as a return to politics as usual, the older generation dominating political offices and economic resources, allowing few opportunities for young people to get ahead. As one student said, “I do not see that much difference in politics in Afghanistan, old political figures are still in power, they have controlled the country for a long time, and they will continue to be in power in the coming years.” Although not directly linked to the electoral process, students did point to the overlap between ethnic concerns on campus and the ways in which national-level politics are widely perceived as primarily deal making between leaders claiming to represent various ethnic groups.

As a result, most students were highly critical of the NUG and the way in which power had been divided between Ghani and Abdullah. Some clearly favored one of these men over the other, but the opinion was almost unanimous that the current configuration was unstable. As one student remarked, the government “looks like one vehicle driven by two drivers.” Both Ghani and Abdullah were criticized for constant politicking when it came to issues such as the appointment of government officials, though Ghani was particularly singled out in several instances for micromanaging government ministries. Locally new governors, district governors, and other positions were said to be distributed as rewards for supporting the campaigns of either Abdullah or Ghani.

Students were critical of government nepotism on appointments, particularly when it came to those taking positions they felt were better suited for younger, less connected officials. One student identified several key elites and the positions their young relatives held:

Ahmad Zia Masoud’s son is a government adviser with a very high salary and he has only recently graduated from university. It is the same with [Vice President] Fahim’s son who is deputy of the NDS [National Directorate of Security], Qanoni’s son is adviser, [former Vice President] Khalili’s daughter is legal adviser in another ministry, and there are many other examples. These appointments are just to keep these people happy but the government is not thinking about the hundreds of high qualified Afghans who are jobless.

Even if they did pass through their courses, few were optimistic about their ability to get jobs, particularly in the government.

The students, however, were also critical of the international community’s role in allowing Afghan political leaders to continue usurping power. The United States was criticized for propping up the ineffective NUG, which several students suggested had been set up by Secretary of State Kerry, who brokered the deal between Ghani and Abdullah. It benefited them because “they can force a weak government to follow their own desires.” This actually then led to unfavorable comparisons with the previous government, one student suggesting that “Karzai was a good president in part because he was often criticizing America for their mistakes in Afghanistan, but this government never criticizes America, they just obey.” Few

The emphasis on ethnicity was interpreted by many students as a return to politics as usual.

felt that this situation was likely to change much: “I think for the next fifty years we will have this problem and we will not be able to elect president by really voting. The president will be chosen by [the] US and its allies and we will just participate in election[s] for dramatic effect.” The statement demonstrates some of the key factors undermining governmental legitimacy from the students’ perspective: a lack of national autonomy on the international stage combined with showpiece elections.

All of this led to a growing contradiction in that students supported electoral reform but were not optimistic that they would generate any real political change, particularly in terms of their ability to participate in politics in a meaningful way. In particular, students had clear opinions about various proposed reforms, such as the introduction of electronic ID cards. Many felt that such technical processes could help the electoral system, but others felt that such programs would only open the door to more elite manipulation. Some suggested replacing election commissioners as a necessary step for any real increase in electoral transparency. Still, as one concluded, “Why should we bother ourselves to vote if there is massive fraud and our vote is not respected and not counted?” The disrespect of public votes and the time taken to cast them, not least the danger people faced in many areas while voting, was a recurring theme in student interviews, alongside the more general disdain for the public that officials appeared to carry. One student described it this way:

In reality there is massive corruption in government organizations and people are upset about this corruption. Government officials at the local level think that government positions are their property and heritage, and they behave with people in a very rude manner. This is the main reason for the lack of cooperation between people and government officials in most parts of the country.

Many student respondents emphasized the need to bring in youth into Afghanistan’s political class and provide them with more government jobs. Because few felt that this was likely in the immediate future, some were considering alternatives. One sharia student discussed how, when studying in Pakistan, he had considered joining the Taliban after his return to Afghanistan. His father, instead, pushed him to continue his studies and ultimately he was glad that he did so, but he was not sure that the government offered much of a path forward for young people like him.

Although most seemed to think it was most likely that the government would continue to muddle along, corrupt and ineffective, largely excluding them from any meaningful political participation, a few were more radical. One even suggested,

I think public revolution is required, because in last fifteen years only a few people, warlords and other powerful actors have been ruling the people. They have all become powerful and rich and do not think of the interests of the people. The only solution is a revolution that brings in a new government that serves all and replaces these figures who should be thrown in jail.

Most respondents were not as extreme in their predictions, but few thought that the current ruling elite would respond to their needs in the short or medium terms, and none thought that a career in government would be an opportunity to change the status quo. This is a marked change in the attitudes: despite being always skeptical of government willingness and ability to provide jobs, some students have previously been keen to influence government policy themselves.²¹

Conclusions: Looking Forward

These three areas of focus suggest disillusionment with the current political situation, in which ordinary voters feel more distant from the government and their leaders than they did before 2014.²² The perceived decreasing responsiveness to constituents and distance between leaders and the public was the overriding theme.

In particular, nearly every interviewee was dissatisfied with the political arrangement holding the NUG together. Respondents were unanimous that the so-called two-headed government was ineffective and inaccessible. This runs counter to the hope that the NUG would represent a more inclusive political settlement between groups in Afghanistan. Additionally, respondents clearly felt that the government was becoming less effective in delivering resources and services. In each set of interviews, respondents pointed to the “reforms” made—including the removal of former governors, cabinet members, and other government officials—as having made government less accountable than it had been.

Although few respondents were eager to see a return of Hamid Karzai, many interviews reflected a certain nostalgia for his ability to achieve service delivery using predictable methods. Several also described in more positive terms than they had done while he was in office, Karzai’s tempestuous relationship with the international community in general and the United States in particular. Although this relationship was often troubled, Karzai is increasingly being seen as a figure who at least superficially asserted Afghanistan’s sovereignty, particularly in comparison with Ghani, whose close ties to the West are still sometimes perceived with suspicion despite a tacit acknowledgment that close ties are critical to securing the country’s economic needs. This reflects an apparent contradiction: interviewees suggest that it is important for the United States to maintain a military presence in the country and continue to provide development assistance but are concerned about what it implies about the weakness of the Afghan state.

Discontent with the NUG raises questions about the future of elections and related political processes in Afghanistan. In the days following the signing of the original NUG agreement, many were optimistic that perhaps Afghanistan could move from its highly centralized presidential system to a model in which different political powers were allocated to a president and to a prime minister. Yet the political gridlock generated by the current NUG has made it difficult for respondents to envision a system in which a power-sharing agreement might operate more effectively. Further complicating the current situation is the growing perception that even these leaders are having trouble controlling their supposed allies. The story of Ghani’s ordering an arrest in Nangarhar only to have the police chief then release the suspect only contributes to this perception locally.

Elections still have widespread support conceptually and voters are not particularly likely to embrace alternatives such as the president being selected via a Loya Jirga. The sense is increasing, however, that elections failed to produce a legitimate outcome in the last round of voting and that disregard among the elites for public opinion and participation is increasing. In Nangarhar, for example, the sense that the situation was more stable and prosperous under Sherzai’s rule than it has been under the governors that have followed him is widespread, this despite the decline in international resources that funded the prosperity. Elections in 2014 and the change in leadership they brought have created more instability and coincided with an economic decline in the province. Such trends do not bode well for the long-term future of democracy in the country.

Relatedly, most respondents believe elections are unlikely to help produce a more representative and effective government if transformative reforms are not put in place first. Promise of reform has been forthcoming since the NUG was established—for example, the

attempt to pilot the electronic national ID card system in Kabul only to be indefinitely stalled by disagreements as to what information the cards should contain. Measures such as the replacement of Independent Election Commission officials were perceived as superficial, meant to symbolize significant change and yet in reality having limited effect. Some respondents talked about the superficiality of reform reflecting, once again, an elite disdain for the voting public and an attitude that did not acknowledge the perceptiveness and skepticism of ordinary Afghans.

Clear across the data was a principal underlying factor delegitimizing the NUG: the complacent disinterest of its official representatives to the governance of its citizens. What is needed now is not the pretense or show of large-scale political reform, or the rhetoric of national unity. Government legitimacy is instead likely to be recognized only after public commitment to democratic engagement with the electorate and provision of basic services, not perceived elite deal-making and squabbling. This process will need to be driven from multiple directions: through top-down electoral reform led by the NUG, through public protest, and through diplomatic pressure from the international community.

To date, elections—and parliamentary and provincial council elections in particular—have in some areas across the country contributed somewhat to keeping local leaders accountable. The increasing disinterest of the ruling elite is not unrelated to the long delay in holding parliamentary polls. However, this delay in itself is a symptom rather than a cause of a more fundamental distancing of the ruling elite from ordinary Afghans. Paradoxically, elections have themselves facilitated this distancing in the way the elites have manipulated them. Elections have been interpreted as unquestionably legitimate in the eyes of international actors, which has rubber stamped the extended rule of those who can pay to bend the process to their advantage. That is, holding the parliamentary polls—reforms or otherwise—will not prove a panacea restoring downward accountability, but will serve as another clear reference point for Afghans about the legitimacy (or lack thereof) of government officials. If and when the next parliamentary elections are held, they will at best function as a way station on the road to realigning the direction of parliamentarians' accountability downward, and to reasserting the value of leaders at least appearing to take an interest in constituent needs. At worst, they will solidify a seeming permanent return to public disenfranchisement from politics alongside violent competition for seats between elites.

Notes

1. Andrew Wilder, "A House Divided? Analysing the 2005 Afghan Elections" (Kabul: AREU, 2005), 39.
2. This paper refers to various types of leaders and elites throughout, including elected parliamentary representatives and provincial council members but also local commanders, businessmen, khans, maliks, and other informal influential leaders. Although all have different roles and access to central government resources, all have been connected to electoral processes in functioning as brokers for vote-getting, sponsoring candidates, or standing as candidates themselves. Respondents often referred to these figures indiscriminately and considered many across all categories to have had an increasing tendency toward disinterest in community needs and interests since the 2014 elections.
3. Although largely qualitative, the findings here reflect and provide nuance to the some more quantitative data put forward in 2016 indicating that some 66 percent of respondents think that the country is "headed in the wrong direction," a number that has increased steadily over the past ten years; Zachary Warren, John Rieger, Charlotte E. Maxwell-Jones, and Nancy Kelly, eds., *Afghanistan in 2016: A Survey of the Afghan People* (San Francisco: The Asia Foundation, 2016), 18.
4. See Scott Seward Smith, *Afghanistan's Troubled Transition: Politics, Peacekeeping, and the 2004 Presidential Election* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2011); Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, *Derailing Democracy in Afghanistan: Elections in an Unstable Landscape* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).
5. For more, see Noah Coburn, "Afghanistan: The 2014 Vote and the Troubled Future of Elections," *Opportunities in Crisis* no. 8 (London: Chatham House, March 2015).
6. Coburn, "Political Economy in the *Wolesi Jirga*: Sources of Finance and their Impact on Representation in Afghanistan's Parliament" (Kabul: AREU, May 2011).
7. See for example, Sayed Sharif Amiri, "Experts Question IEC's Progress on Electoral Reforms," *Tolo News*, January 1, 2017, www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/experts-question-iec%E2%80%99s-progress-electoral-reforms.

8. For more on legitimacy in the Afghan context, see Coburn, "Losing Legitimacy: Some Afghan Views on the Government, the International Community and the 2009 Elections" (Kabul: AREU, 2009).
9. Wilder, "A House Divided," 38.
10. See Coburn and Larson, *Derailing Democracy*; Coburn, "Losing Legitimacy."
11. See Coburn, "Losing Legitimacy."
12. International Crisis Group (ICG), "Afghanistan: From Presidential to Parliamentary Elections," Asia Report no. 88 (Brussels: ICG, 2004), 23.
13. Coburn and Larson, *Derailing Democracy*, chapter 4.
14. Interviews with Hazara analysts in the field. See also ICG, "Afghanistan," 11.
15. The 2005 statistics are taken from Peter Dimitroff, "The September 2005 Parliamentary and Provincial Council Elections in Afghanistan" (Washington, DC: National Democratic Institute, 2005), 25. Andrew Wilder cites thirty Hazara MPs in 2005, however, which would make the increase in 2005 one of six rather than two percentage points ("A House Divided?," 8). The 2010 statistics are taken from National Democratic Institute, "The 2010 Wolesi Jirga Elections in Afghanistan" (Washington, DC: NDI, 2010), 70.
16. Hazara areas also tended to be more secure than Pashtun areas in the province, contributing to the success of Hazara candidates.
17. As one young Hazara respondent explained, "I think one of the reasons of lack of attention to security of demonstrators [referring to the Enlightenment movement protest on July 27] was the confrontation of youths and traditional leaders [within the Hazara community] in which the leaders tried to stop the demonstration and the youths went ahead regardless."
18. This also reflects the way in which interviews were conducted largely before European countries began the large-scale repatriation of Afghan asylum seekers towards the end of 2016.
19. For more, see Dipali Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongmen Governors and the State in Afghanistan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
20. See Casey Garret Johnson, "The Rise and Stall of the Islamic State in Afghanistan," Special Report no. 395 (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace, 2016).
21. Students we interviewed in 2013 were significantly more optimistic about their ability to create political change, possibly relating to the optimism surrounding the run-up to the 2014 elections. See, in particular, Coburn and Larson, "Youth Mobilization and Political Constraints in Afghanistan: The Y Factor," Special Report no. 341 (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace, 2014).
22. This aligns with findings from some national-level studies, and last year's Asia Foundation Survey found only 43 percent of respondents felt that they had any influence over local government decisions, a decrease of 22 percent over the past eight years (Warren et al., *Afghanistan in 2016*, 120).

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