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SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report analyzes the role of the Afghan provincial governor during Hamid Karzai's presidency and how it might develop under the new coalition government. Drawing on interviews conducted in Kabul in the spring of 2014 as well as previous research and published work by the author, the report is part of the broader work being done by the United States Institute of Peace on Afghanistan's ongoing political transition.

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SPECIAL REPORT 385

JANUARY 2016

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Dipali Mukhopadhyay

Provincial Governors in Afghan Politics

Summary

- In post-2001 Afghanistan, the president's prerogative to shape (or dictate) provincial appointments was a vital tool for managing competition, resources, and conflict in Kabul and the provinces. A provincial governor's primary value was, thus, not in governing a province. Foreign-led state-building and counterinsurgency efforts operating under the assumption that subnational governance was about "governing" were bound to fail before they even started.
- Absent clearly defined terms of reference, governors ranged from heavy-handed strongmen to forward-looking technocrats. The position was vaguely defined and limited on paper but could be radically augmented in various informal and unofficial ways.
- President Ashraf Ghani may have wished to usher in a new era of "good" governors, but assumptions about the inherent value of technocratic rule and the inherent risk of strongman politics have proven, time and again, to be out of sync with the realities of Afghan politics.
- As long as the Taliban insurgency rages, the Islamic State presence remains a threat, and foreign troops withdraw, access to hard power will remain at a premium in Afghanistan's political marketplace. As such, Western policymakers should keep their expectations for the National Unity Government in check.

Introduction

The last decade has been a complex and challenging experiment in state-building for the Afghan government, its citizenry, and a wide range of foreign donors and militaries. As the United States and its allies have drawn down their presence and the country continues to move forward with a new administration, many wonder about the fate of the Afghan state and the kind of governance it will provide for its citizens in the coming years. Beyond the general cries of corruption, criminality, and warlordism are the less often articulated reasons for the divide between expectations—Afghan and international—and reality.

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In order to probe and better understand this gap, this report examines provincial governorships as a critical arena in which relations between the Afghan center and its various peripheries have played out. Drawing on interviews conducted in Kabul in early 2014 and previous research and published work, the report looks at how subnational politics actually functioned during Hamid Karzai's presidency.¹

A more realistic outlook will afford policymakers the opportunity not only to dispense with implausible ideals but also to recognize Afghan provincial governance in its various, highly imperfect manifestations. They might thus temper attempts to advance technocratic standards and solutions that do not reflect an empirically grounded (and now well-established) understanding of politics in Afghanistan. They might also acknowledge the degree to which foreign donors and militaries were consistently inconsistent in their agendas vis-à-vis the Karzai regime in ways that activated survivalist strategies on the part not only of the palace but also of government officials in Kabul and across the countryside.

As the Ghani administration takes on the project of governing Afghanistan's provinces, Western policymakers would do best to keep their expectations in check. The coalition government is at once bulky and fragile. Governorships will continue to be at least partly about the management of competition, the facilitation of patronage, and the negotiation and balance of power within this architecture. This government's quest for survival, though distinct from Karzai's, is equally critical, and command over governorships is key to that end.

The Good Governance Aim

Afghanistan's reconstruction effort after 2001 was framed in large part by an ambition to advance a twenty-first century brand of "good governance" in Kabul and the countryside. Astri Suhrke explains it this way: "In its minimalist version the aim was to eliminate 'terrorist safe havens', reconstruct the state, and kick-start the economy; in its maximalist form the plan was also to develop and modernise Afghan society."² The context of the September 11 attacks was of course unprecedented, but the roadmaps proposed were anchored in existing models of postconflict reconstruction and state-building.³

Foreign donors, international organizations, private contractors, and nongovernmental organizations facilitated the state's design on paper from 2001 onward. The 2001 Bonn Agreement laid out a way forward toward "establishment of a broad-based, gender-sensitive, multi-ethnic, and fully representative government."⁴ The 2004 Constitution promised electoral politics, human rights protection, counternarcotics, natural resource management, investment protection, industrial and agricultural development, property rights, access to justice, health care, and education.⁵ The 2006 London Conference's Compact underscored the progressive nature of this joint international-Afghan endeavor in describing how "the foundations for a democratic, peaceful, pluralistic, and prosperous state" had been laid since 2001.⁶ The 2008 Afghan National Development Strategy offered a similar vision for governance: to "strengthen democratic practice and institutions, human rights, the rule of law, delivery of public services, and government accountability."⁷ These documents formed a touchstone for the promise of "good" government and governance.

The government's highly centralized design meant that the presidential palace and national ministries had considerable authority to define, fund, and implement policy. The actual capabilities of the central government to reach and control its citizenry (and its competitors) were limited, however.⁸ In 2002, Hamid Karzai took the helm of a barely existent government with little military capability, control over financial capital, or political influence beyond the walls of the presidential palace. One observer, reflecting on Afghanistan's devastated state at the time, remarked that "Karzai with his friends started from the zero point."⁹

As important, good governance may have been an oft-articulated aim of post-2001 state-building in Afghanistan, but the imperative for foreign intervention in the country's domestic affairs was counterterrorism. State-building was intimately tied to and in the service of a Western mission to dismantle the al Qaeda and Taliban networks. What then U.S. special representative Richard Holbrooke said in 2009 had been true from the start: "Transforming Afghan society is not our mission. . . . We are in Afghanistan because of our national-security interests."¹⁰

The counterterrorism mission and the military campaign it spurred empowered a host of proxies, partners, and foot soldiers. Their growing prominence in the Afghan political landscape was not an accident but instead the result of a campaign with their involvement at the heart of its design. This meant the presence of a formidable set of powerbrokers with which the young regime had to contend. It also meant the persistent imposition of foreign agendas on the state-building project that created a distinct set of incentives for political behavior from those oriented toward cultivation of Weberian "good" governance.¹¹

Strategic Ambiguity and "The Big Shuffle"

The limited capabilities of the new Afghan state, paired with the international coalition's focus on counterterrorism, made the climb toward improved subnational governance a steep one. These challenges were compounded by the collective inclination of foreign donors to operate through channels that circumvented the government and to emphasize institutions and processes in Kabul at the expense of efforts outside the capital. Recognition was growing by the middle of the decade that government would not emerge without a more direct focus on subnational institutions.¹²

Even when the gaze of Western donors shifted to the periphery, close observers articulated steady concern about the ill-defined nature of subnational governing institutions in general and provincial governorships in particular.¹³ The Afghan government's 2010 subnational policy acknowledged the absence of a "clear articulation of the duties and responsibilities of Governors" in its predecessor Law on Local Administration and the degree to which this had generated "significant ambiguity" with respect to the position.¹⁴ This ambiguity was hardly accidental. The Independent Directorate for Local Governance (IDLG) was established in Kabul in 2007 with the ostensible aim of managing subnational governance. But, as one official put it, "the methodology" by which governors received their appointments reflected an informal set of relationships between Kabul and the provinces.¹⁵ Martine van Bijlert describes this situation as the triumph of political discretion over institutionalized discipline.¹⁶

The Karzai team's antipathy for formal institutional growth was, in fact, "a matter of political strategy."¹⁷ The president's prerogative to shape (or dictate) provincial appointments was a vital tool in managing competition, resources, and conflict, not only in the provinces but also in Kabul. Karzai's decision-making process involved consultation with an inner circle of close advisers as well as an outer circle of elites whose interests also had to be reflected, "a complex web of multi-layered negotiations, promises, and pay-offs."¹⁸ In the words of one local analyst, "There is no [formal] mechanism, and this is why we are a traditional country."¹⁹ The president and his coterie resisted attempts to impersonalize and institutionalize the appointments process because doing so would undercut their control over power and politics nationwide.²⁰

In the pantheon of subnational appointments, the office of provincial governor was the most senior and therefore the most prized. Between 2002 and 2014, Karzai undertook what political sociologist Joel Migdal would call "the big shuffle," appointing nearly two hundred provincial governors to represent the government in the country's nearly three dozen provinces. Karzai's approach was characterized by "a dizzying game of musical chairs," whereby governors were appointed, dismissed, and reappointed at a swift, often unpredictable tempo.²¹

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Twenty-six of the country's thirty-four provinces (more than 75 percent) had five or more governors under Karzai. Several of these provinces had upward of seven, eight, or nine appointments. The shuffle included numerous appointments, dismissals, and rotations; dozens of individuals served the president in more than one province.²²

One cannot draw many categorical conclusions from these statistics: Merit, performance, and experience may well have helped determine the government's decision about a particular person. It is clear that Karzai's shuffle enabled the regime to determine and leverage the comparative advantages and weaknesses of appointees in a tailored, adaptive way. It also kept Afghan elites and foreign policymakers alike off balance and, perhaps, a few steps behind the palace: "Given the difficulties and aware of his own fractious coalition, Karzai increasingly used provincial appointments as a strategy of political survival, rather than civil service reform."²³

The palace's capacity to dole out gubernatorial appointments formed the heart of what van Bijlert calls a "politics of relationships" and "one of the main instruments of the [Afghan] government to re-assert its authority and to strengthen its network."²⁴ Dismissive characterizations such as "the mayor of Kabul" betrayed the real influence Karzai was able to exert as a function of subnational appointments. The performance of provincial governors may not have facilitated the kind of nation-building Afghans and internationals had hoped for, but, as one observer noted, "it helped Karzai to be in power."²⁵

Informality and ambiguity also served the needs of the coalition's counterterrorism and later counterinsurgency missions, in many cases, far more than a predictable, rule-based governing bureaucracy would have. International concerns about corruption, abuse, and inefficiency coexisted with (often louder) concerns about insurgent violence, the threat of extremism, and the security of foreign troops. As Barnett Rubin explains, "The intervention in Afghanistan was a counterterrorist intervention." He concludes, "One part of U.S. policy corrupted Afghan officials while other parts tried to investigate and root out corruption. Given the interest that defined the mission, concerns about corruption did not trump those of covert action."²⁶

What's a Governor to Do?

The president and key foreign actors were not the only ones who prized flexibility and improvisation: Governors often pursued their tenures in much the same way that they received their appointments—with little concern for the institutional constraints that theoretically confined them. Even critics of this system recognized the gubernatorial imperative to operate beyond formal strictures. The highly centralized design of the Afghan state did not afford provincial governors formal authority to tax, budget, allocate, or spend on public goods and services, which remained in the domain of centrally administered ministries.²⁷ As late as 2012, provincial administrations remained "without any meaningful role in addressing development decisions related to specific provincial needs."²⁸ One civil society activist conceded,

Realistically speaking, [in] the current situation, the governors probably need to do more than they would do in a normal circumstance, to remain relevant, to be effective, to address the needs of the citizens in a particular province...to think out of the box and, at times, with good intentions, take things in their hand and move forward.²⁹

Absent clearly defined terms of reference or a predictable rhythm of appointments and dismissals, the Afghan provincial governorship manifested in a wide range of forms during Karzai's time in office. Some governors were among the country's most formidable strongmen.³⁰ Others were beacons of technocratic potential for foreign donors to support. A few shaped their provincial political economies in lasting ways, but many left less of a mark, operating in the shadows of more powerful patrons or competitors, sometimes for only a few months at a time.³¹ One former governor explained it this way: "There is no definition of what a governor

is...hence you see different governors.”³² Despite—and sometimes as a result of—these institutional ambiguities, provincial governors undertook a range of activities, few of which credibly advanced so-called good governance but some of which expanded the government’s presence in the provinces. As important, they were part of a larger logic of rule that afforded Karzai and his team influence in both Kabul and the countryside.

What distinguishes provincial governance, in general, from other forms of governance is the necessary combination of local control and deference to the will of the national government. In post-2001 Afghanistan, poppy eradication, tax collection, physical reconstruction, security operations, development plans, elections, and ceremonial assemblies were all evidence of a provincial administration’s existence—welcome or otherwise. Many of these efforts were more performative than substantial. From speeches and decrees to courtly scenes and strategic planning, governors and their superiors in Kabul routinely exercised the theatrics of rule.³³

The influence of a governor on these developments was often difficult to determine given the challenge of parsing gubernatorial contributions from those made by representatives from the central ministries, nongovernmental actors, or foreign donors operating in the province. It was also challenging to ascertain how meaningful and lasting—for better and for worse—these activities were in their impact on the lives of citizens. Moreover, different provinces presented different challenges and requirements. Provinces varied by population size, resource base, relative import to the central government, geography, ethnic and sectarian composition, and foreign attention.

The main concern might have been security in an insurgent-ridden province, but judicial corruption, reconstruction, and agrarian development might have been of greater concern to citizens in other parts of the country. Although the precise nature of a good gubernatorial performance was difficult to measure and generalize, the “character [of governors] and the tone they set greatly influence[d] the nature of governance in a province.”³⁴ It was important, therefore, to conceive of the work of all Afghan governors as a function not only of policy implementation or institution-building, but also of less defined, often non-Weberian activities that in fact mattered a great deal to provincial politics.

Steering the Ship

Provincial governors had, first, a responsibility to coordinate the work of their offices with ministerial outposts and security institutions in their provinces.³⁵ Over the years, various institutional schemes were introduced to facilitate, enhance, and provide incentives for gubernatorial oversight. Their utility and relevance varied, of course, but one government official argued that credible materialization of government programs and policies depended nonetheless on the influence and support of provincial governors.³⁶ Governors had the power to check, nudge, follow up with, and even report on delinquent ministerial directors. A former government official explained that, though a governor was not formally responsible for managing ministerial appointments in the province, powerful governors were in a position to take ministerial directors to task, even to see them removed from office.³⁷

In some cases, governors took initiative in ways that signaled their intention to erect technically capable and responsive institutions of their own making. One former governor claimed his office had established a 24-hour phone hotline that residents of the province could call to register complaints and concerns, such as the quality of a school, requirements for clean water, or a delay in the courts. He recalled a newspaper and a radio program created to provide venues for engagement between officials and citizens. A new information management system, he said, also afforded greater visibility over the work of ministerial directorates. His language was peppered with technocratic buzzwords: “Local government should be transparent, accountable, effective, efficient, people-centered, quick service delivery, public participa-

tion in decision-making and, of course, institutional and individual capacity.”³⁸ Whether these efforts materialized or had any lasting impact, he was intent on conveying his team’s effort to introduce good governance.

He was hardly alone on his quest. In describing Helmand’s former governor Mohammad Gulab Mangal, one official explained how Mangal had transformed the provincial government to “look more formal.” This official similarly categorized a northern governor, Atta Mohammad Noor, as having organized and strengthened governing systems in Balkh province.³⁹ Atta used, for example, a foreign consulting firm to help his office craft a counternarcotics plan and a five-year development plan. Balkh was also a pilot province for public administrative reform. His profile as a strongman did not preclude Atta from embracing certain technical approaches, especially if they enabled him to concentrate his control over provincial politics and policymaking while impressing patrons in Kabul and abroad.⁴⁰ “Coordination of the activities of government departments could either threaten or enhance a governor’s power,” Sarah Lister explains, “depending on how it is organised and whether the governor is both in control of the process, and perceived to be so.”⁴¹

Governors, especially strongmen, were also known to flex their political muscle in a more heavy-handed style. They pushed through favorites and blocked rivals when it came to provincial and district appointments in the administration and police.⁴² Once in office, governors with means of their own could patronize, protect, or intimidate surrounding officials and institutions in terms that strayed beyond the formal government system.

Managing Provincial Politics

Governors also occupied the center of gravity of a complex political matrix in which personalized, patronage-based relationships reigned supreme. Hamish Nixon characterizes the ambit of a governor as “the subnational locus of a ‘government of relationships.’”⁴³ One observer explained that, among other things, “the effective provincial governor in our tradition is to have close relations with the people.” In contrasting the relative merits of governors who had left the country with those who stayed and behaved above reproach during the embattled 1980s and 1990s, he argued that the latter were better anchored in the communities they were meant to serve.⁴⁴ A second observer described the importance of a governor’s ability to engage with “and just listen to people” and argued that an effective governor required a solid grounding in local culture as well as “a good reputation.” A more technical understanding about the workings of government came third.⁴⁵ It is little surprise, then, that the notion of “merit-based recruitment,” with its deliberately impersonal criteria, had limited resonance in the Afghan political system.⁴⁶

Yet another observer explained the importance of reciprocal respect, understanding, and trust between a governor and his constituents. In his view, the role of governor was not unlike that of an *arbab*, or local leader. A good governor, he suggested, remained engaged in the lives of his citizens, lending them sympathy and support during the highs and lows of daily life. He also noted the imperative for a governor to earn the goodwill of those with power and influence in the province.⁴⁷ Governors of different stripes seemed to recognize the degree to which the interests, demands, and actions of local powerholders could not go unaddressed and could actually be assets to their rule. The management of these relations, sometimes lubricated by patronage or threats, was not a formal responsibility of provincial governors; just the same, it consumed a great deal of their time and attention.

One governor explained that he had hundreds of visitors each day, some of whom “would even come and whisper in [his] ear” about their needs and concerns. Another proudly (and dubiously) declared that his administration had “eliminated the gap between the tribes and the government.”⁴⁸ A former governor described the need to “keep the relationship between the people, the tribes, by just seeing them and talking to them.”⁴⁹ A fourth claimed that prominent community leaders from his province had lobbied Karzai to appoint him in the first place.⁵⁰ A

fifth explained how he had actively drawn tribal leaders into his governing project to secure their support and had engaged them on matters related to provincial security and policing as well as local conflict management, reconstruction, and development.⁵¹

Across the country, local powerbrokers—tribal leaders, village elders, commanders—were able to shape a province’s security situation by engaging or counteracting insurgent forces and other armed actors. They could dissuade farmers to grow poppy. Their influence shaped political appointments, voting behavior, popular expectations about physical reconstruction and development, and general attitudes toward the government. One former governor lamented the degree to which this “parallel” system existed, wherein ostensibly “traditional” figures continued to have tremendous sway over politics not only at the local level but also through their relationships with powerbrokers in Kabul.⁵² These actors were often barriers to the consolidation of more formal institutions. But the courtly politics of which they were a seminal part could not be disassociated from the business of governing.⁵³ Provincial, district, and village elites held sway in their communities and in Kabul. A governor’s job therefore involved reckoning with them.

Taking Care of Kabul’s Business

Managing provincial administration and politics was a fundamental part of any governor’s responsibility but so was using his office on behalf of the regime and, by extension, the central government. Although true in any country, this was particularly so in Karzai’s Afghanistan, where so many powerholders operated throughout the countryside, often in ways that directly or indirectly threatened the regime’s control. Governors, then, were a critical lever for the regime to exert influence in the face of numerous challenges.⁵⁴ In describing Karzai’s calculus on gubernatorial appointments, one observer argued that “he want[ed] to inject a source of power within that community so that at the time needed he [could] use that source of power.”⁵⁵

The Karzai regime had several key imperatives, some dictated by insiders and others by outsiders, that required support from provincial powerholders. In this new democracy, electoral politicking was less about substantive platforms and positions and more about patronage and power. Karzai was unwilling to relinquish power over gubernatorial appointments as the 2009 election approached given “the tendency to use senior subnational positions as prizes and bargaining chips.”⁵⁶ In the “marketplace” of political loyalties, the relative value of loyal, capable governors rose when elections approached.⁵⁷

The same could be said of the counterterrorism and counternarcotics projects, though these projects were largely driven by the interests of foreign powers rather than of the regime. The Karzai government’s ability to defend its commitment to undermining the poppy economy, for example, rested on gubernatorial performances in high-cultivation provinces. Atta of Balkh and Gul Agha Sherzai of Nangarhar received much affirmation when they made the poppy ban a high priority.⁵⁸ These campaigns did not necessarily yield sustainable political or economic transformations, David Mansfield and Adam Pain explain. In fact, they inflicted real costs. Yet, “these efforts [were] still described as successful” by the international community, drawing positive attention to their protagonists.⁵⁹ The value of governors at the vanguard of this effort was, again, high for the Karzai regime—and its foreign patrons.

Informal Power as Governing Strength

As these activities suggest, the powers of a governorship during Karzai’s tenure were vague and formally limited but could be radically augmented in informal, unofficial ways. The interstitial quality of informality filled in the cracks of the weak formal architecture of the Afghan state.⁶⁰ In theory, a good governor would demonstrate a combination of “integrity and

technical competence,” thereby fulfilling the Weberian ideal.⁶¹ In reality, a governor’s power derived from sources of outside strength leveraged to different ends, some of which enhanced the ability to control and serve a territory, some of which amplified gubernatorial status and wealth, and some of which did both. Informal power could dictate (and was often dictated by) a governor’s position vis-à-vis local competitors, neighboring countries, Western donors, elites in Kabul, and the president.⁶² It determined the kind of influence a governor could wield in the provincial and national arenas of politics, given the limited formal writ.

Variations between governors on this front were tremendous. Without the right relationships, resources, and loyalties, prospects for success were limited. One citizen recalled a meeting with a governor who lamented his inability to overcome entrenched provincial interests “as if he [was] sort of an employee of one of the line [ministerial] departments” rather than the official with “the final say on paper.” The citizen concluded, “If you’re highly educated with good plans...and don’t have the money to pay for your bodyguards, you have a problem.”⁶³ Talent, expertise, and good intentions were often inadequate absent material strength.

On the other hand, he said, strong governors “were able to control all of the political dynamics, the business, everything, so they could help themselves first, but they could also help and serve the people as well as part of the process.”⁶⁴ A strong governor could influence, even define, the composition of a provincial administration by recommending or denying subprovincial appointments made by the central government. He had the capacity to manage violence, shape trade and economic investment, implement unpopular policies, patronize local elites, extract revenue, attract budgetary allocations or foreign aid, and determine the fates of other provincial institutions.⁶⁵ Former Uruzgan strongman governor Jan Mohammad Khan’s outsized influence is a good example: He and his nephew, Matiullah, were, according to Deedee Derksen, unparalleled in their ability to shape political facts on the ground in Uruzgan.⁶⁶ Susanne Schmeidl describes his relationships with the president and members of the Karzai family, ties to the then-head of the IDLG, and links to individuals in the Provincial Council, provincial line ministry directorates, police, and parliament.⁶⁷ Strength begot strength in such cases, and some governors became extraordinarily powerful political players in provincial, regional, and even national politics.

An observer remarked that a governor with substantial influence could move a project forward in five days whereas a less connected official would need five months to get the necessary permissions from Kabul.

One of the primary assets a governor had was relationships to those with power in Kabul, from palace insiders and ministry higher-ups to parliamentarians. One observer, in describing an effective governor, referenced the ability to “encourage or draw the support...from the central government.”⁶⁸ Another remarked that a governor with substantial influence could move a project forward in five days whereas a less connected official would need five months to get the necessary permissions from Kabul.⁶⁹ A third explained, “If the governor is connected to the palace, then he is an effective one. If the governor is disliked by the president and has no access to the palace, he will not be [so] effective...if they want to achieve something, it’s based on their personal connection.”⁷⁰

Governors with outside access to coercive power could sometimes manage violence in ways a weak governor could not. Those with affiliations to loyal armed men, for example, could not only informally guide them into the rank and file of the police but also command a kind of countervailing authority as need be. On this count, Governor Atta stood out: “He controls all other powers in different places, in different districts. They cannot move against him, against his will, against the government.”⁷¹ Two former governors, presumably lacking their own armed affiliates, bemoaned the absence of a better-institutionalized relationship between the governorship and the security sector: “You [would not] need to have an army of your own if you believe in what you do and you believe that you’re representing the government of Afghanistan and you’re the leader in that province.”⁷²

Outside sources of financial capital also offered leverage and sometimes independence from the central government, which was known to provide some governors with “hospitality

money” to facilitate their politics.⁷³ Over the years, government officials hoarded customs revenue, collected informal taxes, and were associated with lucrative private enterprises from construction and real estate to private security and illicit activity. Governors with substantial independent wealth had a categorically distinct kind of power. Money, and relationships with those who had it, afforded governors opportunities to patronize pet projects, local elites, and ordinary citizens as a traditional khan, or ruler, might. Excess capital reflected and enabled corruption and predation but also afforded governors the opportunity to demonstrate their personal utility in the province.⁷⁴

Governors who could draw on the support of foreign patrons also had the power to change facts on the ground, or at least make the case that they were trying. Many governors received funds outside formal government channels by way of foreign civil and military programs, including provincial reconstruction teams. These initiatives varied widely by region, over time, and with donor priorities. Some governors forged direct relationships with foreign countries that further amplified their coffers and corresponding influence. Herat’s Ismail Khan was the paragon of a fiercely independent governor; during his time in office between 2001 and 2004, he not only defied orders from Kabul but also erected a provincial emirate of sorts. Part of the reason for his ability to operate as he did was, according to Antonio Giustozzi, the assistance he received from Iran.⁷⁵

Gul Agha Sherzai was also able to make use of his close ties to a foreign country—in his case, the United States. For more than a decade, his construction companies profited handsomely from American projects.⁷⁶ Locals consistently referenced paved roads as having been lucrative for him as well as an important contribution to provincial reconstruction. Some also contrasted his relationship with the Americans to that of his predecessor, Haji Din Mohammad, whose impact was far less with respect to immediate aid dividends.⁷⁷ The same could likely be said for Sherzai’s 2013 successor, especially absent a robust American presence in the province. Sherzai leveraged the ubiquitous presence of American forces to bolster his (perceived) strength as well, particularly in his pursuit of an aggressive counternarcotics policy.⁷⁸ Uruzgan Governor Jan Mohammad Khan also became a close partner with the Americans between 2002 and 2006. The relationship amplified his power in the province, given that he reportedly “decided who was and who wasn’t Taliban, all based on his old rivalries.”⁷⁹

Strongmen were not the only governors privy to the support that came with close foreign ties. Daud Saba, a well-educated governor who took the lead in Herat years after Ismail Khan, drew on a notably different set of affiliations and relationships with foreign donors than his predecessor. He described how Western civil and military actors had reportedly provided him support for office furnishings, civil society work, education and health projects, and the provincial police.⁸⁰ In Helmand province, Gulab Mangal assumed the governorship in 2008 as a favorite of the British, who saw him as “fundamental to their efforts to build and reform the Afghan government in the province” precisely because he was not of the strongman ilk.⁸¹ The British and NATO offered him public support when it became clear to all involved that Karzai had different ideas about who should rule in Helmand.⁸²

Like Saba and Mangal, Habiba Sarabi—longtime governor of Bamiyan—could not have cut a more different profile from those of her strongman counterparts. The country’s only female governor and a hematologist, she stood out among her jihadi commander peers. A 2014 vice presidential candidate, Sarabi characterized herself as a qualified leader precisely because she had no association with the country’s war-torn past.⁸³ She received widespread international attention as governor because of her singular path. In 2012, then U.S. secretary of state Hillary Clinton spoke of a 2008 visit with her; in 2010, Sarabi had also been a guest of Clinton, as one of several “women [environmental] conservation leaders.”⁸⁴ Sarabi went on to win the 2013 Ramon Magsaysay award, popularly known as the Asian Nobel Prize.⁸⁵ Her exceptional

Excess capital reflected and enabled corruption and predation but also afforded governors the opportunity to demonstrate their personal utility in the province.

profile was a tangible strength of its own. Technocrats like Saba, Mangal, and Sarabi were able to leverage foreign support to bolster their authority, but they still lacked the heft of their strongman counterparts.

The “Too Strong” Governor?

The country’s most powerful governors could deliver certain benefits to those under their writ, from stability and reconstruction to foreign donor attention and shortcuts through bureaucratic red tape. One commentator reflected on Atta’s success in Balkh as a function of his strength and consequent control over the provincial administration. In contrast, he spoke of Herat’s former governor, Saba, as a well-educated and uncorrupted official who proved ultimately unable to overwhelm resistance from key provincial powerbrokers.⁸⁶

For the Karzai regime, strong governors of all types were a double-edged sword. On the one hand, those with power could advance the president’s agendas in the provinces. In a country marked by ungoverned space and insurgent control, the palace might have prized muscular subnational rulers. On the other hand, strong provincial emissaries could quickly become formidable competitors to the regime they ostensibly served. One official noted, for example, that as Gulab Mangal’s star rose at home and abroad, Karzai recognized him to be “a political power who would not listen directly” to him.⁸⁷ Mangal could now assert an independent political profile of his own.

Ismail Khan, governor of Herat, is perhaps the first best example of the “too strong” provincial governor in the early years of Karzai’s presidency.⁸⁸ “Considering himself to be in no need of any support from a central government that appeared weaker than himself, Ismail Khan consistently showed only a mild interest in being coopted by Kabul,” Giustozzi explains.⁸⁹ Ten years later, Balkh’s governor Atta, who began his political career dependent on the president’s support, had cultivated the capacity to shape events in his province and beyond, largely obviating his need for Karzai’s patronage.⁹⁰ As one observer remarked, “If are powerful, good connections, lots of money, you don’t have to be loyal to the central government. You can be the king of your province.”⁹¹ Both Ismail Khan and Atta were able to control and provide for their populations in largely unprecedented terms. But the independence they could and did leverage on behalf of agendas other than Karzai’s posed a risk that consistently threatened to overshadow whatever governing benefits they offered.

Politics of Survival

What was Karzai looking to achieve, then, through the appointments of particular individuals to particular governorships? Why might strong and capable governors have been more of a threat than an asset to the young government in Kabul? Answers to these questions hinge on the counterintuitive proposition that, for the Karzai regime (and perhaps for regimes in weak states more generally), a provincial governor’s primary value was not, in fact, in governing a province. Consider van Bijlert’s description of the criteria for key subnational appointments: “Affiliation to a certain faction, clan or ethnic group and the ability and willingness to accommodate (or undermine) the dominant political, tribal or economic interests in the area...competence and future performance in the field of governance does not necessarily feature.”⁹²

Governors served numerous functions that did not preclude establishing provincial control or delivering public goods and services. Those functions, though, were often, if not always, secondary to what Migdal calls “the politics of survival.”⁹³ The presidential palace used provincial appointments for reasons beyond the presumptive aim of introducing a “good” governor to a given province. Appointments were leveraged to appease major factions and faction leaders in Kabul and in the country’s regional centers of gravity. Gubernatorial appointments could also introduce and maintain not only factional but also ethnic

balance. Some noted the president's inclination to take into account the particularities of a given province or region in constructing his matrix of subnational appointments. This balance-of-power politics mattered in regional politics as well as individual provinces. For example, one observer noted, "In the north, we always see that he's trying to make sure that [the] Jamiat [Party] is happy and Junbish is happy and then Wahdat," given the long history these parties had, sharing and competing for power.⁹⁴

Governorships offered the Karzai regime opportunities to play favorites with key factions as well as to divide, diminish, or marginalize them.⁹⁵ The president could use a gubernatorial appointment to take sides in a contest for power, pushing one politico to the side while grooming the other to be a loyal client. He could send relatively weak proxies to provinces to poke and prod formidable competitors or to signal strongmen that their domains would remain relatively undisturbed. These appointments could yield newly minted or emboldened powerbrokers whose success depended, at least initially, on presidential support. A gubernatorial assignment also offered Karzai the opportunity to move a problematic individual into another political orbit, where he would be out of the way and otherwise occupied. The interests of foreign powers and the demands of fledgling electoral politics also shaped the landscape of subnational appointments.

As Karzai's tenure came to a close, onlookers commented on the unpredictability and inconsistency of his approach to gubernatorial appointments. One official argued that Karzai did not have a given system or logic but was instead more capricious, motivated by personal preferences and experiences, foreign interests, an ambition to retain power, and a quest to shape his political legacy.⁹⁶ A local analyst noted shifts in Karzai's approach over time, such as first confronting and then courting strongmen. He described how ineptitude or corruption were not necessarily nails in the coffin of a given governor's career; on the contrary, the president might have kept such governors in office intentionally. Instead, the game afoot was about "keeping control over the provinces and so the method [didn't] matter."⁹⁷

Conclusion

Gubernatorial appointments were a valuable instrument of political patronage, manipulation, and influence for President Karzai and his team; this was perhaps the most important perspective from which to understand their utility and purpose in Afghan politics. Well-educated, technically skilled, bureaucratically inclined governors sometimes fit the bill or at least did not encumber the agenda of the day. In many cases, individuals with backgrounds as mujahideen commanders and affiliations with key political-military factions were the candidates of choice. From the palace's perspective, building political institutions, delivering public goods and social services, and even establishing provincial control seem not to have been necessarily (or even often) the key dividends of a governorship. In this sense, foreign-led state-building and counterinsurgency efforts operating under the assumption that subnational governance was about "governing" were bound to fail before they even started.

Rethinking the Notion of a Good Governor

To be a good governor in post-2001 Afghanistan meant something very different from the Weberian ideal. One official mused that a good performance meant different things depending on the audience. The Americans, he argued, wished to see strong players ruling the provinces, to "show smiley faces on CNN and other channels and forget about the root causes of poverty and long-term conflict."⁹⁸ Governors catered to differing audiences as a result. Foreign governments, militaries, and aid agencies mattered and had persistent reach into provincial political economies across the country.

Governorships offered the Karzai regime opportunities to play favorites with key factions as well as to divide, diminish, or marginalize them.

In Kabul, beyond the presidential palace, factional leaders and political heavyweights were valuable patrons and advocates. Ministries mattered because they made decisions about where and how funding would be spent. The provincial audiences who mattered were those with power to enable or hinder a given appointee; the remaining populations were not necessarily of great concern because a governor's political fate was tied ultimately to key decision makers in Kabul. Each of these stakeholders came with their own standards and interests; few were served by institutions that operated independently from personalized politics.

High-performing governors came in different shapes and sizes. What they seem to have had in common was consistent, substantial access to sources of strength—guns, money, prestige, foreign support, salient social and political relationships—that energized their tenures beyond the available formal resources and authorities. From this perspective, there is little surprise that a 2015 quantitative analysis found that “the best governors tend to be those that are least professionally qualified.” Contrary to prevailing assumptions about who was a “good” or “bad” governor, the study indicated that warlord governors often demonstrated a greater aptitude for holding insurgent violence at bay than their technocrat counterparts did.⁹⁹

In a 2014 study, nearly fifty police officers were asked to rate the influence of various factors on Ministry of Interior appointments. Personal connections, nepotism, political connections, and money were each ranked ahead of professionalism.

Patronage politics continued to eclipse professionalization in more than one sphere of subnational appointments. In a 2014 study, nearly fifty police officers were asked to rate the influence of various factors on Ministry of Interior appointments. Personal connections, nepotism, political connections, and money were each ranked ahead of professionalism.¹⁰⁰ One officer characterized the appointments process in strikingly similar terms to the big shuffle of gubernatorial appointments: “It is a game played by senior officials/politicians and state leaders. They change and place their figures and agents in different positions. No one cares about improving police and [the Ministry of Interior]. All the powerful actors care about is placing their agents and cronies in the best place in this chess game.”

Though many underscored the unrelenting influence of cronyism, some interviewees argued on behalf of Kandahar Police Chief Abdul Razzaq. “Despite his complete lack of education,” never mind his infamous reputation as a strongman, his ability to keep the Taliban at bay made him valuable to the security sector.¹⁰¹ Five years before, a member of the Afghan National Security Forces in Uruzgan similarly conceded, “If [now-deceased strongman] MK [Matiullah Khan] obtains the post of CoP [chief of police] then security could be enforced in the province.”¹⁰²

It would behoove Western policymakers to bear this paradox in mind as they reflect on Karzai's presidency and consider how best to engage the Afghan government moving forward. Assumptions about the inherent value of impartiality, education, and links to and affinities for the West should be reconsidered.¹⁰³ Similarly, assumptions about the inherent risks of a militant background, access to capital, or an established local patronage network are out of sync with the realities of political life in provincial Afghanistan.¹⁰⁴ What keen observers implored years ago remains true today. Foreign powers “need to accept that a government, as in the Western understanding of the word, does not (yet) exist; therefore, Western-style, merit-based sub-national governance programmes make little sense.”¹⁰⁵

A Technocratic Turn in 2015?

This urging is perhaps counterintuitive given the profile and proclivities of Afghanistan's new president. After all, Ashraf Ghani made a name for himself after 2001 as a strident technocrat and, once in the palace, made the bold gesture of downgrading all provincial governors to “acting” status.¹⁰⁶ One might have expected, then, a dramatic shift in the tenor and substance of subnational politics after 2014. Ghani's categorical dismissals were not, however, followed by the timely appointment of technocrat governors across the country.¹⁰⁷ Any attempt at rapid reform seems to have been tempered by the realities involved in satisfying the needs of his large and unwieldy ruling coalition.¹⁰⁸

By the spring of 2015, only a handful of appointments had been made. The sense that acting governors lacked the will or the ability (or both) to govern in prolonged limbo was growing. This political lethargy had an impact, according to several Afghan observers, on service delivery, security, corruption, and public opinion about the government.¹⁰⁹ There were few incentives for the caretakers to take care of their provinces when their futures remained uncertain. Some critics went further, arguing that acting governors actually had an incentive to “deliberately support insecurity in their respective provinces to make the situation look fragile in order to continue their jobs” or “to use corruption to fill their pockets” while they still could.¹¹⁰ One had to wonder whether less-than-ideal new governors might be better than no new governors, given the surrounding turbulence of insurgency and foreign troop withdrawals.

The summer did bring around twenty new gubernatorial appointments, many of which reflected the president’s reform agenda. As one report explains, “Many governors have ‘modern’ skill-sets and assets, they are younger, and also lacking in one of the main credentials of the past: fighting experience.”¹¹¹ Two women—Masooma Muradi and Seema Joyenda—were appointed to lead the provincial governments of Daikundi and Ghor. Muradi found herself initially blocked from taking office in the face of opposition from a local strongman’s supporters; Joyenda’s appointment met with local resistance as well.¹¹² The new president has expressed an ambition to send university-educated individuals to govern provinces other than their own. His selections so far suggest a predilection for young, worldly types qualified on the basis of their education and work in civil society: “Experience in working with the government is rare.”¹¹³

The rise of newcomers within the ranks of governorships is noteworthy, but such individuals will continue to risk marginalization in provincial political economies where force and money matter. Rumors in the fall of 2015 about the possibility that Kunduz’s young Mohammad Omar Safi—Ghani’s first new gubernatorial appointment—might be replaced by former strongman Gul Agha Sherzai reflected some collective impulse about the import of strong governors in insecure provinces.¹¹⁴ As the Taliban encircled the provincial capital in late September, Safi left the country for what he later described as a presidentially approved trip.¹¹⁵ Bethany Matta, reflecting months before on this governor’s tenure, had remarked on his lack of government experience and poor political instinct when it came to provincial players with coercive power of their own. Kunduz was meant to be a model province for Ghani’s brand of improved governance and demilitarized politics; instead, it was nearly lost to the insurgency. Safi’s deputy at the time, Hamdullah Daneshi, was a former commander whose sympathies rested with the mujahideen. In June, he declared, “If the president starts to take the weapons away from militias, Mir Alam, or other commanders...even I will defend Mir Alam!”¹¹⁶ He is now acting governor in Kunduz.

Meanwhile, the president has not replaced the country’s strongest governor, Atta Mohammad Noor. Atta and other regional strongmen (Vice President Abdul Rashid Dostum among them) are one of the few bulwarks against the unrelenting insurgency that now blatantly threatens the government’s grip on the north.¹¹⁷ As long as the Taliban insurgency rages, concerns mount about an Islamic State presence, and foreign troops grow increasingly scarce, the Afghan political marketplace will put a premium on those with access to hard power of their own. From that perspective, Ghani may wish to “dismantle regional fiefs” across the country but may end up having little choice but to follow in his predecessor’s footsteps.¹¹⁸

In addition, although the Ghani administration has hinted at devolution of political and fiscal responsibility to provincial governors, there are reasons to believe that the presidential palace will remain reluctant to give too much power away.¹¹⁹ In fact, some have interpreted the president’s predilection to appoint relatively feeble governors as a sign of his wish to establish greater dominion over subnational politics.¹²⁰ As van Bijlert wrote more than five years ago, it should come as little surprise that any Afghan president would seek to keep personalized control over subnational appointments: “It is crucial that a patron is able to act with

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discretion and to implement, disregard, or bend rules as seen fit, otherwise there is nothing to negotiate about...It would be a mistake to view the current fragmented and centralised system as solely linked to the current President.”¹²¹

The reality, evidence of which has accumulated year after year, is that powerful political actors at the country’s center and its variegated periphery remain invested in a neopatrimonial system. Barring radical changes in the design and capacity of the Afghan state, governorships will continue to play an important role in Kabul’s management of competition and patronage politics. Some governors—new and old—may well advance the presence of the national government in the provinces; they may even establish provincial control and facilitate delivery of public goods and services. The dividends from their tenures will likely continue, however, to fall outside the definition of good governance as commonly understood. This likelihood does not preclude possibilities for structural change and eventual reform but should serve to manage the expectations of Western policymakers.

Notes

1. The author did not use a recording device during interviews, so quotations may have errors. Relevant published works include: Dipali Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); "Warlord as Governor in Afghanistan," in *Working Toward Peace and Prosperity in Afghanistan*, ed. Wolfgang Danspeckgruber (Boulder, CO: Lynne Reiner, 2011); "Disguised Warlordism and Combatant in Balkh," *Conflict, Security and Development* 9, no. 4 (2009): 535–64; "Warlords as Bureaucrats: The Afghan Experience" (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2009).
2. Astri Suhrke, "Reconstruction as Modernisation: The 'Post-Conflict' Project in Afghanistan," *Third World Quarterly* 28, no. 7 (2007): 1291.
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4. For the full text of the agreement, see www.un.org/News/dh/latest/afghan/afghan-agree.htm.
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6. "The Afghanistan Compact," February 1, 2006, www.nato.int/isaf/docu/epub/pdf/afghanistan_compact.pdf.
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9. Interview with professor, Kabul, 2014.
10. The late Richard Holbrooke as quoted in Barnett Rubin, "What I Saw in Afghanistan," *The New Yorker*, July 1, 2015.
11. Sarah Lister and Andrew Wilder, "Strengthening Subnational Administration in Afghanistan: Technical Reform or State-building," *Public Administration and Development* 25, no 1 (2005): 40–41; Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords*, Rubin, "What I Saw."
12. Sarah Lister and Hamish Nixon, "Provincial Governance Structures in Afghanistan: From Confusion to Vision?" (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2006), 3; "An Assessment of Sub-National Governance in Afghanistan" (Kabul: Asia Foundation, 2007), 1; Sarah Lister, "Understanding State-building and Local Government in Afghanistan," Working Paper no. 14 (London: Crisis States Research Centre, 2007), 1, 11–12; Wilder and Lister, "State-building," 85.
13. Lister and Wilder, "Strengthening Subnational Administration," 46; Lister and Nixon, "Provincial Governance Structures," 1; "Service Delivery and Governance at the Sub-National Level in Afghanistan" (Washington, DC: World Bank, July 2007), v; "An Assessment of Sub-National Governance," 4; Hamish Nixon, "Subnational State-building in Afghanistan" (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2008), 14, 55; Martine van Bijlert, "Between Discipline and Discretion: Policies Surrounding Senior Subnational Appointments" (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2009), 6.
14. Islamic Republic of Afghanistan "Sub-National Governance Policy," Spring 2010, <http://jawzjan.gov.af/Content/Media/Documents/SNGP-English-Afghanistan307201192625245553325325.pdf>, 60–61.
15. Interview with government official, Kabul, 2014.
16. "Three out of the five governors who had served as provincial governor under the Karzai administration before (often in multiple provinces), had at some point been forced to leave their post due to serious allegations of misconduct. The fact that this did not preclude their reappointment indicates that the IDLG has not been able to break the pattern of recycling problematic—but loyal—governors." Van Bijlert, "Between Discipline," 16. Three years later, Douglas Saltmarshe and Abhilash Medhi noted that "although they appear before a selection board, the appointments of both *wali* and *woluswal* are essentially political in nature." "Local Governance in Afghanistan: A View from the Ground" (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2011), 19.
17. Van Bijlert, "Between Discipline," 3.
18. *Ibid.*, 8; Michael Shurkin, "Subnational Government in Afghanistan" (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2011), 6.
19. Interview with analyst, Kabul, 2014.
20. Van Bijlert, "Between Discipline"; see also Lister, "Understanding State-building," 7.
21. Joel Migdal, *State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 72–73; van Bijlert, "Between Discipline," 8.
22. All statistics offered in this paper are working estimates based on raw data collected with research assistance. Possible errors and omissions at this stage will be corrected in future publications.
23. Suhrke, "Reconstruction as Modernisation," 1302.
24. Van Bijlert, "Between Discipline," 8.
25. Interview with government official, Kabul, 2014.
26. Rubin, "What I Saw"; see also Suhrke, "Reconstruction as Modernisation."
27. Lister, "Understanding State-Building," 4; "An Assessment of Sub-National Governance," 14.
28. Saltmarshe and Medhi, "Local Governance," 19.
29. Interview with civil society activist, Kabul, 2014.
30. Wilder and Lister, "State-Building," 88; Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords*.
31. See example of Faryab governor operating in General Dostum's shadow in Lister and Wilder, "Strengthening Subnational Administration," 42.
32. Interview with former governor, Kabul, 2014.
33. For my theoretical characterization of provincial governance, see Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords*, chapter 1.
34. Saltmarshe and Medhi, "Local Governance," 15, 19.
35. *Ibid.*, 2.

36. Interview with government official, Kabul, 2013. Lister and Nixon, "Provincial Governance Structures"; Nixon, "Subnational State-building"; Susanne Schmeidl, "The Man Who Would be King: The Challenges to Strengthening Governance in Uruzgan" (The Hague: Netherlands, Institute of International Relations, Clingendael, 2010), 37–44; Saltmarsh and Medhi, "Local Governance," 16.
37. Interview with former government official, Kabul, 2013. In addition, "governors can block almost any of the programs or activities in their provinces because all expenditures must go through the provincial finance offices and require the signature of the governor in advance." "An Assessment of Sub-National Governance," 17.
38. Interview with former governor, Kabul, 2014.
39. Interview with government official, Kabul, 2014.
40. Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords*; on Balkh's pilot reform efforts, see Lister and Nixon, "Provincial Governance Structures," 11.
41. Lister, "Understanding State-Building," 10.
42. Lister and Wilder, "Strengthening Subnational Administration"; van Bijlert, "Between Discipline"; Schmeidl, "The Man Who Would Be King"; Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords*.
43. Nixon, "Subnational State-Building," 15.
44. Interview with person from Nangarhar, Kabul, 2014.
45. Interview with analyst, Kabul, 2014.
46. Van Bijlert, "Between Discipline," 12, 18.
47. Interview with member of High Peace Council, Kabul, 2014.
48. Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords*, chapters 2 and 3.
49. Interview with former governor, Kabul, 2014.
50. Interview with former governor, Kabul, 2014.
51. Interview with former governor, Kabul, 2014.
52. Interview with former governor, Kabul, 2014.
53. Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords*.
54. Ibid.
55. Interview with member of High Peace Council, Kabul, 2014.
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58. See the writings of David Mansfield, including "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2010); Jonathan Goodhand and David Mansfield, "Drugs and (Dis)Order: A Study of the Opium Trade, Political Settlements, and State-Making in Afghanistan," Working Paper no. 38 (London: Crisis States Research Centre, 2010), 10–28.
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61. On the unsuccessful push for meritocracy, see van Bijlert, "Between Discipline," 11–13.
62. Schmeidl, "The Man Who Would Be," 25, 29; see also Shurkin, "Subnational Government," 7.
63. Interview with civil society activist, Kabul, 2014.
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66. Deedee Derksen, "The Politics of Disarmament and Rearmament in Afghanistan," *Peaceworks* no. 110, (Washington, DC: U.S. Institute of Peace, 2015), 28.
67. Schmeidl, "The Man Who Would Be King," 27.
68. Interview with member of High Peace Council, Kabul, 2014.
69. Interview with civil society activist, Kabul, 2013.
70. Interview with analyst, Kabul, 2014.
71. Interview with professor, Kabul, 2014.
72. Interview with former governor, Kabul, 2014; Mukhopadhyay, "Disguised Warlordism"; Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords*, chapter 2.
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74. Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords*; more generally, "provincial and district administrators have no option but to look for sources of revenue elsewhere and the legitimacy of the de jure state is called into question when it has no resources to do anything" (Wilder and Lister, "State-Building," 94). On the "peace economies" of strongmen, see Antonio Giustozzi, "War and Peace Economies of Afghanistan's Strongmen," *International Peacekeeping* 14, no. 1 (2007).
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77. Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords*, chapter 3.
78. Mansfield, *A State*, chapters 7 and 11.

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ISBN: 978-1-60127-318-5

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