

Politics and Governance in Afghanistan: Nangarhar Province

Key messages

- Initiatives to build improved and sustainable governance requires an understanding of formal and informal power relations.
- Policy makers must take into account the process of renegotiation and reconsolidation of the existing order through new institutions and practices.
- Informed and genuine donor coordination is necessary to avoid cultivating a rent-seeking culture among existing political elites, and prevent the capture of public resources and formal institutions for personal gain.

The Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) is a research programme which aims to generate a stronger evidence base on how people in conflicted-affected situations, make a living, access basic services (like healthcare, education and water) and perceive and engage with governance at local and national levels. This is in the hope of informing future policy and programming that will ultimately have better outcomes for people living in conflict affected situations. SLRC's Afghanistan research programme seeks to generate robust practice-relevant evidence on livelihoods, service delivery and social protection that will inform better modes of international engagement in Afghanistan.

What is this study about?

Afghanistan's government is often described as fragmented and fragile. In many instances, the central government fails to function effectively, particularly beyond the capital. This does not mean that there is disorder at the regional or provincial level. To date, the international community's governance agenda has consistently failed to consider and adequately address the more informal, relationship-based reality of how Afghan government institutions function.

Despite recent attention to subnational governance, confusion still persists

Briefing Paper 9

January 2015



SLRC Briefing Papers present information, analysis and key policy recommendations on issues relating to livelihoods, basic services and social protection in conflict-affected situations. This and other SLRC Briefing Papers are available from www.securelivelihoods.org. Funded by DFID, Irish Aid and EC.

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Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium
Overseas Development Institute (ODI)
203 Blackfriars Road, London SE1 8NJ
United Kingdom

T +44 (0)20 7922 8249
F +44 (0)20 7922 0399
E slrc@odi.org.uk
www.securelivelihoods.org



about the role and mandate of formal institutions. Particularly at district level, the lack of clarity has meant that more informal networks continue to dominate local affairs and access to resources. District bodies are a case in point. They represent an existing order, but this doesn't necessarily lead to governance which local populations feel is representative of them.

The first of three case studies, this paper has sought to comprehend the local context and highlight the shortcomings of development and governance interventions. In an effort to understand the power relations at play, it explores subnational governance and access to public goods. A number of deciding factors influenced our choice of the Nangarhar province as a focus case for the study. With a large US military presence, Nangarhar has received significant aid funding since 2001. Other factors include its centrality to eastern politics; its unique identity as a regional centre of power; its critical geopolitical importance and its close linkages with Pakistan.

This research was driven by three core questions:

- What regional social orders have emerged in Afghanistan, and what are the conditions that have generated them?
- How do these vary in the extent to which they provide core public goods and what are the incentives that drive this?
- How can international actors influence these orders to deliver more widely and effectively, and limit rent seeking practices?

What did we do?

This briefing paper draws on findings emerging from qualitative data collected in Nangarhar and Kabul. Between June and December 2013, 75 interviews were conducted in both the capital and the Eastern province. Most interviews were semi-structured. Interviewees were key informants comprising of parliamentarians; provincial council members; governors and district governors; ministers; civil servants, government employees and broader civil society actors; youth and human rights activists; as well as business people and aid workers.

The interviews focused on building an understanding of the following:

- The role that key actors play, both within formal government structures and outside of them.
- The role of the formal state.
- The role of individual power brokers in limiting or enhancing access to public goods and economic opportunities.

Additionally, semi-structured focus group discussions and interviews were conducted in Jalalabad and the Torkham border, as well as in three Nangarhar districts (Sukhroad, Rodat, and Dari Noor). These were selected for closer

examination, with an aim to understand: how the de facto and de jure state functions in Afghanistan's districts; the relations between districts and the provincial government in Jalalabad; and how the above are linked, through line ministries or other means, to the central government in Kabul.

The study also draws on a wide array of secondary data and analysis, including official statistics, news articles, field reports, historical materials and grey literature.

What did we find?

Informal governance and strongmen

The Afghan government appears centralized only on paper. In practice, important centres of power exist at the regional and provincial level, meaning the central government often finds itself in competition with the regional strongmen. Following decades of conflict, these strongmen and ex-commanders were able to assert their authority in the vacuum left behind by the displacement of old rural elites. Their monopoly on violence in the early years after the fall of the Taliban allowed them to assert their authority, capture resources and appoint themselves to the de facto government. By the time the first round of elections occurred in 2004 and 2005, their role was established. In successive Provincial Council and Parliamentary elections in 2009 and 2010, many were elected to office and came to dominate provincial politics.

Strongmen and their networks of influence have deeply penetrated the state at all levels. They have overwhelmingly subverted government institutions and ultimately undermined the ability of nascent institutions to serve the needs of Afghans. Furthermore, Kabul has used governor appointments as a means of co-opting regional strongmen. For the Karzai government, for example, the appointment of provincial governors, ministers and other key positions was an important tool towards cultivating the secondary political settlements integral to creating a viable state. So the established order is consolidated rather than contested. Some technocratic appointments were made. But these were largely limited to provinces where there are few resources to capture and where the overriding priorities of the international community are of less concern.

In fact, there is a significant overlap between provinces that most strongly exhibit these dynamics and the availability of resources (which have been co-opted by strongmen with relative ease.) Many of these provinces border Pakistan. They have heavy cross-border trade, and continue to have high levels of foreign troops. This means a significantly higher distribution of aid money. It also means a host of other opportunities for revenue generation, ranging from construction to the outsourcing of security and logistics. The licit and illicit extraction of

revenue and resources is central to these bargaining processes.

Monopolising public goods and resources

The appointment of Gul Agha Sherzai as governor of Nangarhar in 2005, provides a useful contrast in understanding the role that public good provision plays in enabling strongmen to consolidate their base. It is also a special case that shows the tactics an outsider used to prevail over an established local order. Hailing from Kandahar, Sherzai was forced to cultivate support among Nangarhar's population and gain decisive international support. For a time, he did so by giving the appearance of providing for the public good through various public works projects and other means.

Public goods in this context are less about basic services (many of which are provided by NGOs and the UN rather than directly by the government) and more to do with security, dispute resolution and access to livelihoods opportunities.

In Nangarhar, regardless of the tactics various individuals employed, the provision of public goods was rarely pursued for its own sake. In instances where these hybrid government officials spearhead some improvement to governance, goods or services, it is often driven by self-interest. Ultimately they are reinforcing the dependence on relationships to the detriment of the development of institutions. If roads are built, for example, the primary motivating factor is not the roads themselves or the public support they will bring. Instead, these power holders are driven to advocate their construction by the prospect of road building contracts and the opportunities to access resources.

Legitimacy and power is almost always derived from the coercive control or capture of state and non-state resources. Resorting to tactics that appear to be public goods provision is limited to instances where the means of providing support is mutually beneficial, or where the individual has few other options (as with Sherzai). In other words, public goods provision is merely an unintended side effect.

A rent-seeking political culture

More often than not, international interventions in Afghanistan to reform governance have been characterised by a process of 'institutional bricolage' (Stark and Bruszt, 1998). This has meant that instead of bringing about institutional and social transformation, reforms and policies have merely led to the renegotiation and reconsolidation of the existing order through new institutions and practices. This is not due to lack of ambition. Rather, it's a failure to bring about change which stems from a failure to understand the

incentives and relationships that drive the existing social order.

US military presence and the international community has played a large role in cultivating a 'rentier political marketplace' (de Waal 2009) in Afghanistan, wherein elites jockey for favour with international actors. In effect, this is a pervasive rent seeking system. A competition among government officials and informal power brokers vying for access to those resources provided for the purpose of bolstering security and eradicating opium. Access to these resources has enabled the establishment of private construction and security firms.

International interventions themselves have also been marked by competition, with overlapping and contradictory reforms implemented by various aid actors (donors, aid agencies and the UN). The continuing lack of clarity, oversight and consistency has unwittingly enabled the capture of state institutions for personal gain. Furthermore, the lack of coordination among donors and initiatives has worked to their advantage. It has allowed them greater reign to manipulate international support and capture revenue streams. This is true both among major power holders, as well as at the local level among village rivals or competing tribes.

The US military, and the massive influx of money it brought, has created a system of winners and losers in eastern politics. For example, Sherzai relied on US military backing in the early years of his governorship. While other power holders, such as Ali, leveraged US military support to strengthen their position against rivals who received none. Ali in particular has used his influence with US forces to ensure provincial security forces reward men loyal to him with positions in both formal security forces as well as various private security companies.

What does this mean for policy makers?

In Afghanistan, corruption within the system is rife. Combined with the highly centralised control of government budgets and authority, those who 'play by the rules' have effectively been disempowered. Relative to those who have an external power base and access to resources outside the system, the former do not stand a chance. And the capture of formal institutions for personal gain has been enabled by the lack of clarity regarding subnational governance institutions.

Perhaps much of this confusion could have been avoided through genuine donor coordination but the problem runs much deeper than that. Many of these governance programmes seemed to assume that nothing existed beyond the provincial capital. When in reality, sophisticated systems of local governance have long been in place. In the east, these customary institutions and the network of relationships are relatively strong

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and carry legitimacy. Simply imposing structures from the outside, without sufficient understanding of the local context, is unlikely to work.

In order to craft effective governance, such initiatives will have to employ a sophisticated understanding of the processes of 'bricolage' that are likely to occur. They must ensure that District Consultative Committees are both representative and sufficiently empowered to fulfil their mandate. Existing power relationships and systems must be considered together with the legitimate government. Particularly since discussions of 'formal' and 'informal' governance often see them as separate systems, which can obscure the interdependent relationship between the two.

The drawdown of US troops and the decline in the resources they provide is already having an impact on the local economy and political dynamics of Afghanistan. This is as true of those power holders who have benefitted from US military support, as it is of their rural constituencies. With dwindling international resources and attention, it may be that such power holders are less motivated to provide for the public good. Previously, the rural elite was able to negotiate benefits for themselves through the monetary benefits of opium eradication projects. Now, the drawdown and consequent disappearance of this funding has weakened their position within their communities. This is evidenced by Sherzai's downfall in the east, as well as the fact that many have already returned to poppy cultivation.

The political landscape in Nangarhar is set to change with Sherzai's resignation and the 2014 and 2015 elections. Whether the old social order will be reinforced through appointments and electoral processes remains to be seen. Nonetheless, transformative moments such as these allow an opportunity to re-examine the ways in which the international community has intervened. Evidence from Nangarhar suggests that a new approach that leads to genuinely improved, sustainable governance outcomes for Afghans is urgently needed.

Written by Ashley Jackson (ashley.a.jackson@gmail.com)

This briefing paper is based on the following SLRC working paper: [Politics and Governance in Afghanistan: the Case of Nangarhar Province](http://www.securelivelihoods.org/publications_details.aspx?resourceid=310&Page=2) (http://www.securelivelihoods.org/publications_details.aspx?resourceid=310&Page=2) written by Ashley Jackson

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