



Researching livelihoods and services affected by conflict

Politics and governance in Afghanistan: The case of Kandahar

Working Paper 34

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June 2015



About us

Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC) aims to generate a stronger evidence base on how people make a living, educate their children, deal with illness and access other basic services in conflict-affected situations (CAS). Providing better access to basic services, social protection and support to livelihoods matters for the human welfare of people affected by conflict, the achievement of development targets such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and international efforts at peace- and state-building.

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List of acronyms and glossary

Acronyms

ALP	Afghan Local Police
AREU	Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CDC	Community Development Council
DDA	District Development Assembly
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICG	International Crisis Group
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
KAF	Kandahar Airfield
MoE	Ministry of Education
NDS	National Directorate of Security
NSP	National Solidarity Program
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
SIGAR	Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction
SLRC	Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium
UNAMA	UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
US	United States

Glossary

Jirga	Customary council
Khan	Traditional leader or ruler, usually with significant wealth and/or land
Malik	Village leader or notable
Mujahedeen	Resistance fighter(s)
Shura	Customary consultative council, usually at village level
Ulema	Scholar or religious leader

Acknowledgements

Generous thanks go to Adam Pain and Giulia Minoia, co-researchers on the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium Afghanistan project, and Danielle Huot, who provided support to the peer review and editing process. Additional thanks are owed to the staff of the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, particular Nader Nadery and Chona Echavez. Ihsanullah Ghafoori, Wamiquillah Mumtaz and others who prefer not to be named helped conduct the field research and analysis. Paul Harvey and several other (anonymous) reviewers provided helpful comments on earlier drafts of this report.

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Executive summary

The second in a series of case studies undertaken by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) as part of the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium (SLRC)'s work, this research aims to look at subnational governance and access to public goods. It seeks to understand the power relations at play, attempting to separate how government functions in reality from narratives created by the international community about how government should function. Kandahar was chosen for research based on its economic, political and social importance, being only second to Kabul as a political seat of power. There is an old adage that whoever controls Kandahar controls Afghanistan, but the reverse could equally be true: whoever controls Afghanistan must control Kandahar.

Key government officials in Kandahar after 2001 derived their power, at least initially, from outside the formal system. After the fall of the Taliban, they leveraged their influence to capture international resources. These strongmen and their networks have penetrated the state at all levels, overwhelmingly subverted government institutions and ultimately undermined the functioning of nascent institutions. Many of these figures are a product of the preceding decades of conflict: they have generally derived their power from their role as fighters and commanders during the previous decades of conflict. In the post-2001 period, they received support and resources from international militaries and the broader international community based on the belief that they possessed the ability to provide security and help defeat the insurgency. In nowhere as much as Kandahar has the premise of security been such a powerful and decisive factor in determining who would rule and who would not, and who would have access to resources and who would be excluded.

Three core elements have been central to the governing strategies of power-holders like Gul Agha Sherzai, Ahmed Wali Karzai and Abdul Raziq: foreign military support (and, to a lesser extent, international aid); state-sanctioned legitimacy (in the form of elected or appointed office); and control of border revenues. These resources have in turn allowed them to create and maintain the extensive patronage networks that govern access to state and non-state resources. These networks are based heavily on the manipulation of tribal networks to form constituencies and alliances. To a greater degree than anywhere else in Afghanistan, the use of state-sanctioned and non-state-sanctioned violence (in the form of paramilitary forces or private militias) plays an essential role in the accumulation and maintenance of power.

These networks govern access to state and extra-state resources, meaning only some groups and individuals have varying degrees of access. Degree of access is determined by the individual's proximity to the personalities at the centre of elite networks and governed by a set of generally mutually beneficial rules and expectations. Tribal affiliation plays a critical role in Kandahar but not a determinative one. Having a member of the same tribe on the Provincial Council or in a high position at line ministry matters in guaranteeing access to services or income-generating opportunities, but only if this individual is embedded within an influential network (and women are more inherently limited in this respect). As rational actors, average Kandaharis do their best to maximise their relationships in order to navigate this 'government of relationships'.¹ In the words of one informant, *'If I vote for [an] honest person, I am sure he will not be able to resolve my problems. If the police take a member of my family,*

¹ Terminology adapted from Nixon (2008).

*he will not be able to get them released [...] Why would I vote for a person who will not be able to resolve my problems?'*² However much they might decry corruption or resent the rules of the game, they have little alternative.

Others groups (often, again, falling along tribal lines) are almost entirely excluded, which has rendered the system inherently volatile. According to another informant, 'Some people will say the government is fine but the others – whom Shah Wali [Karzai] or Raziq do not help – they will tell you the truth.'³ This exclusion is clearly illustrated at the district level. The Achakzai of Spin Boldak, which is closely tied to Abdul Raziq and is the site of a lucrative border crossing into Pakistan, benefits immensely from both services provided by official government institutions and unofficial taxation and associated border activities. The Noorzai of the district (which controlled these resources prior to 2001, to the exclusion of the Achakzai), who are largely cut out of this activity and have been marginalised by the government, fare far worse; many have turned to the Taliban. It is largely because of these exclusions, and at times the violent persecution of excluded groups, that the insurgency is able to operate.

There is also a high degree of violent competition among elites, marked by assassination campaigns, armed violence, threats and intimidation. While this violence may appear chaotic from the outside, it is strategic and organised (as exhibited by the networks of quasi-official and unofficial detention facilities maintained by a wide range of power-holders as well as the strategic nature of assassinations). It is also highly short-termist, driven by the desire for immediate political or economic gains. The behaviour of these elites, however, is above all opportunistic in that alliances cross traditional divides when mutually beneficial and relationships between elites are marked by both collusion and competition on an ongoing basis.

These personality-based patronage networks have profoundly shaped the operations of institutions at subnational level. State institutions and formal rules lay on top of the networks of access that form the bedrock of the social order in Kandahar, providing a thin veneer of government authority and legitimacy. This 'institutional bricolage' has meant that, instead of institutional and social transformation, reforms and policies have merely led to the reconsolidation of the existing order through new institutions and practices (Stark and Bruszt, 1998). Line ministries and other government bodies are governed by prevailing interests rather than formal rules, which helps explain how the role of the Provincial Council, as well as the degree to which the role and influence of government bodies, has varied so significantly over time. The real power does not lie with state institutions but with the men at the centre of the networks of access that regulate political and economic life in the province.

There is no evidence from the case of Kandahar that elites, even if weak or threatened, may be induced to provide public goods or reform their behaviour. Even when elites appear to act in the public good (such as with improving civil servant salaries, as Sherzai did, or taking measures to improve security, as with Raziq), outward appearances are misleading. Access to public goods, including essentials like justice and security, is governed by a closed system in which a select few have access. If some public good has arisen as a result of this political manoeuvring, it is likely to be little more than an unintended side-effect.

Efforts to improve subnational governance reform, which have focused largely on building technical capacity, have consistently neglected to address the factors and forces that undermine the viability of state institutions. Any coherent strategy must deal with the threat posed by power-holders in order to

² Interview with a local non-governmental organisation worker, Kandahar City, November 2014.

³ Interview with a civil servant, Kandahar City, November 2014.

create space for the formation of independent institutions. It is unlikely that such actors can be converted or incentivised to reform. While it may be ultimately destabilising to marginalise elites entirely, they can be disempowered and gradually undermined. This would require a strategy to obstruct their access to resources and their control of the networks that sustain them. Such a strategy would comprise excluding them from access to foreign military support and preventing them from controlling or accessing international aid; imposing central state control over border resources; precluding the opportunity for power-holders to establish control through proxies; and strengthening state security forces and the institutions that control them, which would include preventing the creation of personal or informal militias.

Since 2001, the international community has had a profoundly contradictory and ultimately self-defeating strategy. While spending significant energy and resources on improving governance, donors and foreign militaries have nurtured and sustained a system that has profoundly weakened and corrupted nascent subnational government institutions. First, Sherzai, Ahmed Wali and Raziq all received significant military support. Without it, they would not have been able to establish dominance over economic, social and political activity in Kandahar. International military support has also been integral to the ability of power-holders to build the quasi-official security apparatuses that have helped them consolidate power and perpetuate insecurity and/or human rights abuses. International military support has also provided them with legitimacy as well as income, generally from side businesses in contracting and service provision.

Second, control of border resources and road checkpoints has been essential to creating revenue streams and income-earning opportunities to sustain patron–client networks. A significant share of Kandahar’s border revenue never reaches the state, yet rectifying this has always been subverted to security interests in the border areas. Finally, nearly all of the powerful men in key government positions in Kandahar since 2001 are alleged to have maintained or sanctioned secret prisons, to have overseen brutal paramilitary or quasi-official security forces who have used torture and executed captives and to have used state forces and/or their security apparatus to target political, tribal and economic rivals. All of these tactics have been carried with substantial (if, at times, unwitting) support from US and other international forces.

1 Introduction

This research takes as its starting point the assumption that technocratic solutions and internationally backed programmes aimed at improving governance in Afghanistan have failed because they fundamentally misunderstand the country's social and political orders. State institutions are only one of many key sources of authority, resources and legitimacy in Afghanistan (Mielke et al., 2011). They are rarely the most important or the most powerful, particularly at the subnational level. Power is exercised in many forms, with patron–client networks that run through and extend beyond the state. In Kandahar, these relationship-based networks regulate nearly every aspect of political and social order, including access to justice, employment and participation in the economy.

Adapting North et al.'s (2007) concept of a limited access social order to the case of Afghanistan, this analysis situates the case of Kandahar in terms of a broader context in which political elites maintain an uneasy and fragile truce over a factionalised country. Patron–client networks, based around a central personality, are a key organising principle at local level, and personal connections are required to access state and non-state resources. Drawing on the work of Sharan and Heathershaw (2011), it explores how the dynamics of inter-elite competition in Kandahar have shaped the process of institution building and formal government structures. It seeks to understand the strategies of power accumulation and the exercise of that power, contrasting the period from 2002 through 2011, where strong men played a dominant role at provincial level, with the contemporary context (2012 through the present), in which power is considerably more fragmented. It also seeks to understand what this means for Afghans in everyday life, through a focus on district level governance and access to services.

After Section 2 of the paper looks at the methodology and approach, Sections 3 and 4 examine how personality-based patronage networks function at the provincial and district levels, respectively. Section 3 traces the trajectory of various personalities, their strategy of governing and the impact of inter-elite competition on the form and function of state institutions. Section 4 looks at how this translates to the district level, where both power and state institutions are far more diffuse.

2 Methodology and approach

This paper is the second case study in a series published by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) that explores regional political dynamics and governance. Three core questions guide the work in this series:

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

Kandahar was chosen because of its economic, political and social importance both in national terms as well as with regard to the attention it has received from the international community. For hundreds of years, Kandahar has been a breeding ground for rulers in Afghanistan. The Durrani kings who ruled Afghanistan from 1748, from Ahmed Shah Durrani's reign, until the 1970s came from Kandahar. Durrani tribes in Kandahar benefited from their links to the central state and the development of the government presented new opportunities for patronage. Mirroring this in the contemporary context, Kandahar is the home province of former President Karzai, and as a result the central government and even Karzai himself have played a uniquely intimate role in local politics. Additionally, Kandahar illustrates the impact of external military interventions and aid on local political dynamics as well as the ways in which insecurity has influenced the international aid and governance agenda.

This study draws on over 60 interviews conducted predominantly with men from May 2014 through January 2015. The majority of these were semi-structured interviews, with key informants including parliamentarians, Provincial Council members, governors, ministers, district governors, civil servants and government employees, youth and human rights activists, broader civil society actors, business people and aid workers.

In addition to interviews in Kandahar City, Kabul and elsewhere, three districts in Kandahar were selected for closer examination (Arghandab, Dand and Spin Boldak). The aim of the research undertaken at district level was to understand how patronage networks function through state institutions at a lower level. We also examined relations between the districts and the provincial government in Kandahar City and their links, through line ministries or other means, to the central government in Kabul. The security of researchers and those interviewed constrained the choice of districts, regrettably limiting the options available. We also drew on a wide array of secondary data and analysis, including official statistics, news articles, field reports, historical materials and grey literature.

3 Provincial politics and governance

This section provides a picture of the various personality-based patronage networks that have played a central role in Kandahar over the past decade. It traces Kandahar's trajectory from the warlord politics that characterised the years following the fall of the Taliban to a more diffuse and fragmented contemporary political context. The analysis is based around the role of these hybrid government officials in elected or appointed office, with a central focus on how their role in government has allowed them to shape the function of the state at local level.

3.1 Gul Agha Sherzai as provincial governor

After 11 September 2001, many of the *mujahedeen* commanders driven out by the Taliban returned. The fall of the Taliban in Kandahar created a vacuum in which these commanders sought to reassert themselves. US backing was decisive, and few received as much support as Gul Agha Sherzai in the early days of the war. Sherzai was born in Kandahar, the son of a minor Mahaz-i-Mili (National Islamic Front of Afghanistan) commander and small businessman. During the Najibullah regime, he served a commander for Mahaz-e-Mili; under the *mujahedeen* government, from 1992 through 1994, he was governor of Kandahar. It was these *mujahedeen* forces, heavily comprised of Barakzais and Achakzais, that he reactivated, using with US- provided cash and weapons as well as a group of US Special Forces to assist in the effort.

At the same time, Hamid Karzai – also backed by the US – had been negotiating a peaceful surrender of Kandahar City from the Taliban with the help of Mullah Naqib, an influential Alokozai tribal elder and former *mujahedeen* commander from Arghandab district. Although Naqib had backed the Taliban in their early days, he supported Karzai's efforts to lead a revolt and leveraged his relationships with Taliban leadership to encourage them to surrender. In exchange, Mullah Naqib was promised the position of governor. When Kandahar City fell in early December, Sherzai's and Naqib's forces went to battle over who would control the province. Kandahar City descended into looting and disorder. With US forces on Sherzai's side and Sherzai threatening all-out war, Karzai and Naqib ultimately relented. Sherzai became governor.

Sherzai initially concentrated on marginalising his competition and side-lining his enemies. Being seen as the only trusted official able to keep the Taliban out and restore order enabled him unparalleled access to funds and support from US Special Forces. Although Naqib had been instrumental in the handover of Kandahar after 2001 (and acted to protect his areas of influence in Arghandab district and beyond from Taliban encroachment in subsequent years), Sherzai portrayed him as a Taliban sympathiser to US and Canadian forces.

Currying favour with international forces was critical to Sherzai establishing dominance. International military forces would spend more money in the south than anywhere else, and aid spending, driven by security concerns, would also be disproportionately focused there. The scale and scope of the international military intervention in Kandahar would come to have a profound impact on the local political order. This worked in two ways – through direct support to key figures and through the broader international aid effort. In terms of direct support, US forces in particular lent their backing early on to key individuals (such as Gul Agha Sherzai, Ahmed Wali Karzai and others) rather than nascent institutions. This cultivated a rentier political marketplace characterised by pervasive rent-seeking and intense (occasionally violent) competition among elites for access to critical revenue streams. Loyalty

and assistance in achieving counterterror and counterinsurgency objectives trumped any major concerns about corruption, accountability or human rights abuses.

US Special Forces continued to support Sherzai's paramilitary forces, to the neglect of the more time-consuming but critical task of developing state security forces. These paramilitary forces ostensibly focused on counterterror and counternarcotic efforts. They pursued the Taliban relentlessly, even though there were few, if any, Taliban or Al Qaeda actors present in Kandahar at this point.⁴ They targeted those rivals involved in the drug trade, despite credible evidence that Sherzai and/or his associates were, in fact, heavily involved in opium cultivation and trade. In reality, Sherzai and his men created intelligence that ensured the destruction of their tribal, economic and political rivals.⁵ Not only did international forces provide Sherzai with funds and backing, but also, by tipping them off on his rivals or those he feared would threaten his legitimacy, Sherzai was often able to squeeze out or simply eliminate the competition.

Many key figures from Sherzai's forces were appointed to state security structures as and when they developed. Sherzai's militias were led by a childhood friend, Haji Gulalai, who was named to head the provincial department of the National Directorate of Security (NDS) when it came into being. Sherzai's forces primarily comprised the Achakzai, so critical in his campaign to assume power in Kandahar, who then unsurprisingly came to be significantly overrepresented in the police. Providing security in this early period had economic incentives (as it does now). Gulalai and his men took custody of many of the men captured by Afghan fighters and foreign forces at the NDS headquarters and Sarpoza prison as well as many unofficial 'secret' prisons. Most prisoners were beaten and tortured; the lucky were released if their families could pay a bribe (Miller et al., 2014).

While much of the larger aid effort was ostensibly aimed at reconstruction, aid money was subverted, skimmed or otherwise manipulated by a variety of power-holders at various levels. Securing the backing of international forces, gaining contracts to provide services and controlling the implementation of development projects became essential to political survival. Sherzai and others would redistribute the spoils through their network, reinforcing and consolidating their position and their control over access to state and developmental resources.

Kandahar Airfield (KAF), which Sherzai captured in these early days, would become instrumental over the long term. While KAF initially supported 8,000 people, it would grow to support 32,000 by 2010 (Motlagh, 2010). Sherzai also used land grabs to capture property he would then rent out to international forces at a handsome profit (Gopal, 2014b). Sherzai family members established lucrative businesses in everything from taxi services to construction companies. At one point, the Sherzai family interests ranged from providing the gravel used by the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) to the leasing of KAF to international forces (Chayes, 2007). He netted an estimated \$1.5 million per month in exchange for providing fuel, building materials and other items to US forces. These items had a significant mark-up. For example, gravel used to repair the Kandahar runway sold at \$100 a truckload when it should have cost around \$8 a truckload (Rashid, 2008). While the military money stopped flowing as directly to Sherzai as time went on, he continued to benefit enormously both financially and in terms of political legitimacy from close relations with the Canadian PRT and US Special Forces.

⁴ While it is difficult to put an exact date on the re-emergence of the Taliban in Kandahar, there were virtually no credible reports of insurgent-attributed attacks in Kandahar in 2002 and very few Taliban present at all in Kandahar until late 2002. They did not establish stable strongholds in the province until 2004 and only began to infiltrate areas close to Kandahar City in 2005-2006 (see Giustozzi, 2008).

⁵ For more detail, see Gopal (2014b: 110-115).

Anyone who wanted to participate in the war economy had to gain access to his networks, whether to work as an interpreter or start a construction business.

If US funds and backing allowed Sherzai to achieve a position of dominance over his rivals, his position of governor gave him legitimacy and allowed him to consolidate state resources. Spin Boldak Customs House, where many years prior he had been a customs officer, was another major source of revenue. Until his removal in 2003, Sherzai reportedly kept most of Kandahar's customs revenue (rather than sending it on to Kabul), netting him an estimated \$8 million a month (Forsberg, 2010). Throughout Kandahar City and at the border, he levied taxes on local businesses and traders in exchange for permission to operate.

Sherzai used some of this money to virtually double the low salaries of teachers and other civil servants (Giustozzi and Ullah, 2007). However, these jobs were not open to all. Government and employment appointments went to those Sherzai needed to keep onside. This included members of his tribe, the Barakzai, who dominated provincial-level positions. In 2003, among 60 heads of the civil departments of the province, only eight were not Barakzai (ibid.). Other beneficiaries included key tribal allies, such as the Popalzai, who dominated district-level governance, and the Alokozai, who were heavily represented within the police (although Sherzai continually sought to exert his control over the force), with Alokozai strongman Akram Khakrezwal serving as provincial police chief. The Achakzai, who had played such an important role in enabling Sherzai to take power, received important positions in the lucrative regime, controlling the border crossing at Spin Boldak – to the exclusion of the Noorzai in the district. In general, the majority of the Panjpai, notably the Noorzai, and the Ishaqzai, along with the Ghilzi, were marginalised from government.

The importance of tribal identity defines politics in Kandahar. Part of this is historical. The special favours the central state bestowed on the Durrani, over the Ghilzi, had elevated them locally and nationally before the Soviet coup. In Kandahar, elite Durrani families owned much of the land in Kandahar, with the village leaders (*maliks*) and tribal elders beneath them subservient to this ruling class (Rubin, 2002). However, tribe is but one of many forms of identity in Kandahar, and these structures were profoundly weakened, with many of the elite fleeing the country after the communist coup in 1978. By the time of the Taliban's emergence in 1994, the old guard of tribal leadership had been 'virtually eliminated' (Rashid, 2000: 19). Like their leader Mullah Omar, many early Taliban were from the marginalised Ghilzi tribe (although there were certainly many Durrani Taliban). Basing their appeal on Islam and Pashtun nationalism, the Taliban in many ways transcended the tribal ties and relations that had dominated Kandahar's old social order.

What Roy (1986) terms a 'mythological reference to a tribal past' (p.15) became a central component of the personality-based networks that dominated politics after 2001. Tribal identity is critical to negotiating access to resources and in consolidating power. It is these relationships, more than any other, that enable individuals to obtain state resources for their district, get a job in local businesses or government or even negotiate to free a relative detained in a government jail. The result was that key offices and departments were staffed by influential male members of local tribes with few administrative or technocratic skills. The state itself became a resource for patronage and the consolidation of power. Subnational government institutions were structured and staffed based on their loyalty and accountability to a single person rather than the central government and the populace.

Establishing the monopoly on violence, on the one hand, and being seen to provide security, on the other, was essential to consolidating political power in Kandahar. The great irony is that this practice is inherently destabilising. As Sherzai's security apparatus became notorious for its abuse of civilians,

torture and summary execution of former Taliban figures, Kandahar became increasingly insecure. The formal security forces remained weak and divided in loyalty between Sherzai, Khan Mohammad and Ahmed Wali Karzai (Giustozzi and Ullah, 2007). Their loyalty was often bought with Sherzai's private wealth. In one dangerous operation, participating police were rewarded with a AFS1,000 (approximately \$17) and a new car (Smith, 2006). Kandahar remained essentially lawless, illustrated by the attempted assassination of Hamid Karzai in Kandahar City in September 2002.

In August 2003, Sherzai was removed as governor and appointed by Karzai as minister of urban affairs. Kabul had been frustrated in its attempts to compel Sherzai to hand over customs revenue in Spin Boldak and under increasing pressure to remove 'warlords' from positions of power (Ismail Khan was stripped of his position of commander of the Fourth Corps around the same time and removed as governor of Herat the following year). Sherzai's power had already begun to wane in Kandahar, in large part because of the manoeuvrings of his main rival – Karzai's brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai. Sherzai was briefly reappointed as governor in Kandahar in late 2004, but, with the loss of customs revenue and his alliances weakened, his position *vis-à-vis* Ahmed Wali (who was elected chair of the Provincial Council in 2005) continued to decline.

3.2 Ahmed Wali Karzai as provincial council chair

Ahmed Wali Karzai, who had spent much of his adult life abroad, returned to Kandahar shortly after the US occupation began. His half-brother, Hamid Karzai, appointed him head of the Kandahar reform *shura*, a precursor to the Provincial Council, in 2002. The Popalzai Karzais have long been an eminent family, with Karzai's father Abdul Ahad playing a prominent role in the government of Zahir Shah. After 2001, it would be through Ahmed Wali Karzai that the family would reassert itself in Kandahar. With Hamid Karzai running the country as president, Ahmed Wali assumed the leadership of the Popalzai tribe at local level. It was from these quasi-official positions that he began to build his base of support.

Using a tactic Sherzai would later adopt as Nangarhar governor, Ahmed Wali and his brother Qayum set up organisations and councils at provincial, district and village level in order to build a base of support among rural elites and allied tribes. These networks would become essential to Ahmed Wali in election mobilisation on behalf of himself, Qayum (who was elected to Parliament in 2005) and his brother, Hamid (Wilder, 2005). Like Sherzai, he received significant support from US Special Forces and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). He served as a key broker for aid agencies and local businessmen, who would line up to petition him at his home (Keen, 2012). However, Ahmed Wali was still less prominent and powerful in these early years relative to Sherzai and the other *mujahedeen* commanders who had returned to Kandahar after 2001.

This would change with the 2005 elections, when he was elected to the Provincial Council. This did little to change the role Ahmed Wali had been informally playing, but was nonetheless important because it provided him with official legitimacy and sanction to carry on these activities, ostensibly on behalf of the government. As Forsberg (2010) notes, Ahmed Wali now occupied 'a formal, democratically-elected position which legitimized his influence in the province, protected him from calls for his removal and gave him official reason for carrying on relations with the international community in Kandahar' (p.24).

Ahmed Wali envisioned a much more active role for the head of the Provincial Council than the one outlined in the Afghanistan Constitution. When asked in 2005 about his plans, he said, 'There are lots of things we can do. For example, reconstruction money – how is it spent, who get its – or security,

dealing with corrupt police' (Wilder, 2005: 42). The Provincial Council was a critical tool for Ahmed Wali. He was able to leverage it to demand 'government accountability' by summoning the directors of line ministries to report on their activities. While this appeared to be in the public good, it had the net effect of making line ministers accountable only to him. Ahmed Wali used the council as a tool to create, control and resolve conflict. The perpetuation of tribal disputes or land conflicts had an economic and political logic in that members of the council would be called on to mediate, for a price and generally in deference to Ahmed Wali's wishes.⁶

Ahmed Wali's relationships with Kandahar's governors varied. Competition with Sherzai was masked by an ostensibly collegial, if distant, working relationship, in which they rarely openly challenged one another. Asadullah Khalid, appointed governor in 2005, was born in Ghazni, where he had previously served as governor, meaning he had no local constituency. Khalid, recognising that his influence in Kandahar was dependent on Ahmed Wali, became a staunch ally. Displaying much the same ruthlessness as Ahmed Wali, Khalid maintained a paramilitary force well known for brutality towards enemies or competitors and a private prison where he was believed to have personally tortured prisoners.⁷

With Sherzai gone, Ahmed Wali became the main beneficiary of international military support. Kandahar Strike Force, comprising some 400 men, received significant training and support from the CIA (Filkins et al., 2009). Ahmed Wali was careful to distance himself from the force, publicly denying his links with it (US House of Representatives, 2010). The force regularly conducted raids ordered by the NDS or others, and at times identified themselves as government officials.⁸ These forces later multiplied to various small units ostensibly providing protection in and around Kandahar City (Filkins, 2010).

Ahmed Wali also facilitated the work of private security companies, such as US Protection and Investigation, among others. This privilege extended to Karzai relatives including Hashmat Karzai (Ahmed Wali's brother), who ran the Asia Security Group, which oversaw security for US bases and convoys, and Ahmed Rateb and Rashid Popal (Karzai cousins), who established the Watan Group. Watan provided security to the US military and US-funded development projects, including the lucrative construction of the still-uncompleted Dhala Dam electricity project. A 2010 US congressional report accused Watan and other companies loosely affiliated with Ahmed Wali's network of running a protection racket in which they filtered payments to local 'warlords' for security along major routes (US House of Representatives, 2010).

Ahmed Wali leveraged his links with US and Canadian forces to gain contracts and control military-implemented aid projects. This included land and property rentals: his network aggressively seized lands the US and Canadian forces were likely to want. Ahmed Wali leased Camp Gecko, the CIA base that would also house the Kandahar Strike Force and Mullah Omar's former home (Cavendish, 2011). It also included military-driven aid projects, which dramatically increased with the troop surge. In 2010,

⁶ Interview with political analyst, Kabul, June 2014.

⁷ Interview with former NDS official, Kandahar, January 2014. For abuses more generally attributed to Khalid, see also Smith (2010) and Human Rights Watch (2015).

⁸ Interview with former NDS official, Kandahar, January 2014. See also Trofimov (2013).

the US government devoted \$276 million in funding from the Commander's Emergency Response Fund, which focused on small construction and other quick impact projects, to Kandahar (Aikins, 2012).

Ahmed Wali did not directly monopolise these contracts: a number of small contracting and other businesses sprang up in response to the money available. He did, however, regulate access to these contracts, and those who wanted them would have to directly or indirectly seek his approval. This approval, in many cases, came in the form of paying some benefit or favour to him or his clients in return for access.⁹ Those who did not gain Ahmed Wali's favour, or whose endeavours simply became too lucrative, were driven out of business and their contracts awarded to those with greater standing in Ahmed Wali's network (Constable, 2011).

Almost no activity of any political or economic value took place without Ahmed Wali's sanction. According to one Kandahari political analyst, 'Even if you wanted a nothing appointment, to the Ministry of Education [MoE] or something, it was not the government that decided but Ahmed Wali Karzai.'¹⁰ This included the drugs trade. Ahmed Wali is alleged to have levied heavy taxes on the transport of opium across bridges connecting the cultivating regions of the Helmand River Valley to Kandahar.¹¹ He is also believed to have entered into a power-sharing agreement with Haji Juma Khan over the drugs trade after the 2005 US arrest of major drug trafficker and one-time ally, Haji Bashir Noorzai (Filkins et al., 2009).

Some of this income was redistributed within Ahmed Wali's network, with the rest likely sent overseas or reinvested in various business and real estate ventures across Afghanistan. In addition to drug money, land grabs (either private or in the guise of state interests) underpinned many of these new domestic projects. The Provincial Council played a useful role, albeit one that overreached its mandate. At one point, it asserted ownership of water rights over a local tribe that had communally managed the water supply. Ahmed Wali Karzai is also believed to have been behind land-grabbing from the Ministry of Defence for property on which Ahmed Wali's brothers would later build Aino Mina, a multimillion-dollar gated community (Bowman, 2010). Time and again, Ahmed Wali used the imprimatur of the Provincial Council and other state institutions as tools to enrich himself and those in his network. The consolidation strategies Ahmed Wali pursued came at a considerable cost to Kandahar in terms of security and stability. Kandahar during Ahmed Wali's tenure was only marginally less lawless than under Sherzai. Random killings and assassinations were widespread, with more than 500 politically motivated killings believed to have been perpetrated between 2002 and 2012 (Azami, 2012). Paramilitary forces are often difficult to control, even by those ostensibly in command of them, and the coercive pursuit of power can get out of hand in a way that undermines the international support that sustains them. A case in point was the 2009 incident in which Ahmed Wali Karzai's Kandahar Strike Force killed the Kandahar police chief, Matiullah Qati, after the police had arrested one of its members. The murder caused widespread outcry given the group's links to the CIA. Abuses perpetrated by the security forces have driven civilians towards the Taliban, and inter-elite competition that has turned violent has, at times, been a greater source of instability than the insurgency, particularly in Kandahar City.

⁹ Interview with construction company manager, Kandahar City, June 2014.

¹⁰ Interview with political analyst, Kabul, June 2014.

¹¹ Interview with government official, Kabul, June 2014.

The exclusionary nature of access to resources left those on the outside resentful and vulnerable. The Alokozai tribe is one such example. Their exclusion from government structures, particularly after the removal of the Alokozai provincial police chief in 2004, and Karzai manipulation of tribal dynamics illustrate how excluded groups became vulnerable to the insurgency. After Mullah Naqib, the powerful leader of the tribe that had clashed with Sherzai over control of the province in 2001, passed away in 2007, Ahmed Wali intervened in tribal succession. Instead of leadership passing to another respected elder, President Karzai travelled to Kandahar to appoint Naqib's son Kalimullah as the tribal leader. It is likely the Karzais believed Kalimullah, then 26 years old, could be easily manipulated and controlled. The tribe, when unified, had provided an important bulwark against the Taliban in Arghandab.¹² The Taliban seized this opportunity to launch several large-scale operations in Arghandab and a campaign of assassination directed towards the tribal leadership in 2007 and 2008, using Arghandab as a base from which to launch attacks on Kandahar City.

Ahmed Wali was increasingly criticised in the international media and by diplomats as time wore on. At the height of his power in 2011, he was assassinated by a bodyguard, Sardar Mohammad, in his home. While the Taliban claimed responsibility, rumours swirled of Mohammed's links to the CIA, which some believed had taken matters into its own hands after diplomatic efforts to remove Ahmed Wali from Kandahar were unsuccessful (Amoore, 2011). However, there is little evidence to support this. Mohammad was alleged to be a heavy drug user who exhibited erratic behaviour in the weeks before his death, and US diplomatic officials were highly frustrated with the CIA's ongoing efforts to protect Ahmed Wali.¹³

3.3 Abdul Raziq as police chief

Several key figures moved to fill the vacuum created by Ahmed Wali Karzai's death, but it was ultimately Abdul Raziq who rose to prominence. Raziq belongs to the Adozai branch of the Achakzai, and hails from the border district of Spin Boldak. Before the communist coup in 1978, the Noorzai and Achakzai shared the cross-border trade, but Raziq's uncle, Esmat Muslim, sought the support of the communist government to assume control. The Noorzai supported the Taliban when they gained control over the border, to the exclusion of the Achakzai, many of whom joined the *mujahedeen*. Both Raziq's father and his uncle were killed by the Taliban, which Raziq often cites as a driving factor in rooting out the insurgency. When Sherzai was assembling his forces in late 2001, the Achakzai supported him on the assumption that they would once again control the border when the Taliban fell.

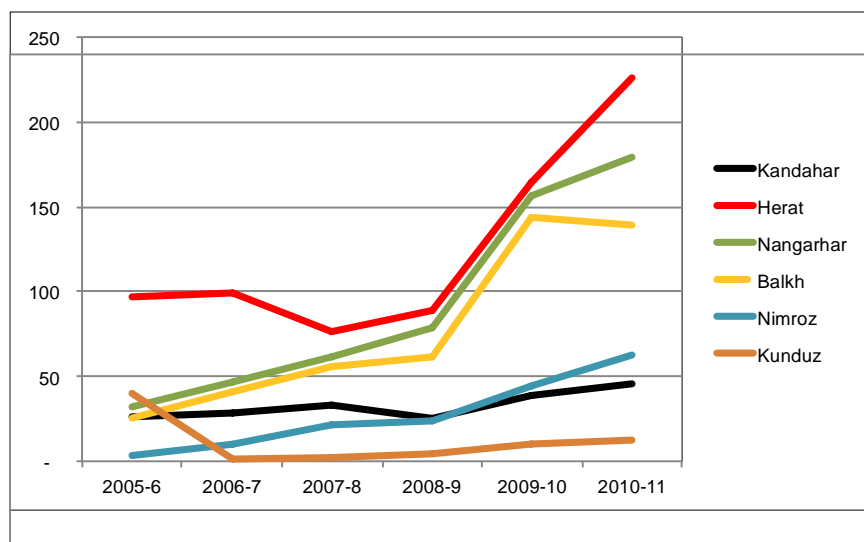
Raziq, in his early 20s then, was part of that force. The commander of Sherzai's force, Fayda Mohammad, was initially put in charge of the border but soon left, reportedly frustrated with his inability to crack down on smuggling (Aikins, 2009). The tribal *jirga* convened to select his replacement made an unusual choice with Raziq, then relatively young and unknown. Initially a Sherzai proxy, he later cultivated close relationships with Ahmed Wali Karzai and Asadullah Khalid.¹⁴ He provided two key things to his patrons: customs revenue and electoral support.

¹² Interview with government official, Kabul, April 2014.

¹³ Correspondence with analyst, May 2015; see also Anderson (2011) and Cavendish (2011).

¹⁴ Interview with local government official, Spin Boldak, December 2014.

Figure 1: Reported customs revenue, 2005-2011 (US\$ millions)



Source: Afghanistan Revenue Department.

At the border, he oversaw the unofficial taxation of vehicles crossing to and from Pakistan. He also established a trucking company and is believed to have accumulated interests in several other businesses, generating an estimated \$5-6 million per month in 2010 (Aikins, 2009; Partlow, 2010). Official customs revenue figures are generally erratic in Afghanistan, and believed to represent only a fraction of the taxable goods crossing the border (SIGAR, 2014). While progress has been made at other key border crossings, like Herat and Nangarhar, Kandahar's official customs revenue figures remain suspiciously low.

When it came to voting, Raziq's control of the border allowed him to, for example, take voting boxes into his custody over night for 'safe-keeping', as he did in 2009 (Aikins, 2009). In 2014, security was used to justify the police replacing elections monitors at many of the open polling stations in insecure areas (Gopal, 2014c). Raziq also allegedly targeted those helping rival candidates.¹⁵ He arrested one district governor he believed was buying votes (later let go at the insistence of Hashmat Karzai) and detained election observers affiliated with Abdullah.¹⁶

While his initial strength derived from his economic control of the border, Raziq built strong relationships with US forces. He provided them with intelligence but, more importantly, he kept the critical border-crossing route for US supplies secure enough for transit.¹⁷ The US became so dependent on his control of the border that many US officials believed they had no choice but to work with him (US House of Representatives, 2010). He also aggressively targeted alleged Taliban in and around Spin Boldak, many of whom were Noorzai who had sided with the Taliban after their exclusion from cross-border trade and Raziq's rise to power (Aikins, 2009).

Raziq has long been a controversial figure. In 2006, he was briefly suspended during a Ministry of Interior inquiry into allegations of extrajudicial killings by his police force (HRW, 2011). In 2009, a senior Afghan police official believed to be under Raziq's command was arrested for transporting 40 tons of

¹⁵ Although Raziq did not publicly endorse a candidate, he was believed to have favored Rassoul in the first round of voting and Ghani in the second round.

¹⁶ Telephone interview with journalist, Kandahar City, January 2014.

¹⁷ Interview with local government official, Spin Boldak, December 2014.

hashish (Farmer, 2009). Nonetheless, he was appointed police chief for the province in 2011. In 2014, he publicly proclaimed that he ordered his forces to execute alleged Taliban captives (Ghanizada, 2014). Amid the subsequent outcry, he submitted his resignation to President Karzai. Karzai refused to accept it, and Raziq kept his position and appears unrepentant, recently telling a *New York Times* journalist that his men ‘have permission to kill 26 [alleged Taliban] a day or, if they can, even 2,026 a day’ (Mashal, 2015).

In Kandahar City, many of those interviewed praised Raziq for bringing security to the capital. Few mentioned what has been widely reported: that his men have left the corpses of alleged Taliban lying in the city’s streets as a warning and that they have routinely tortured detainees and execute prisoners without due process (Gopal, 2014a; ICG, 2014; Qazizai and Sands, 2014; UNAMA Human Rights, 2013; Walsh, 2014). The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission is regularly denied access to official prisons and has made no claims to inspect the numerous private prisons operated by police or commanders affiliated with them.¹⁸

What goes on outside the formal justice system is much harder to track. After the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) Human Rights released a report on the torture of prisoners in Afghan detention in 2011, US forces stopped transferring detainees into Afghan prisons. In response, Afghan security officials increased the number of secret prisons in operation in order to escape monitoring (Gopal, 2014a). A close associate of Raziq’s, Abdul Wadood Sarhadi Jajo, was well known for his brutality and ran a prison in Kandahar City as well as others elsewhere that likely included US bases handed over to the Afghans.¹⁹ Before Jajo’s assassination in March 2014, NDS allegedly transferred prisoners they ‘couldn’t break’ into his custody; further, individuals (predominantly men) alleged to have committed even minor offenses, such as not having identity cards, were also held and tortured there.²⁰

That Raziq’s brutality was hardly remarked on by many informants may be the result of fear but also the fact that such practices have become the norm. The privileged access to security that some of the right tribe or other affiliation enjoy, and the violence that those of competing tribes or affiliations outside of Raziq’s network are subjected to, are hardly surprising either. The only difference with Raziq is that at least his strategy has yielded a tangible improvement for many of those living in the city.

Because Raziq was seen as essential to security, US forces and NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mentors essentially looked the other way. One of Raziq’s US Special Forces mentors explained that, ‘the first priority is to beat the Taliban. Once this is done, we can shift our attention [...] Raziq can beat the Taliban’ (Trofimov, 2010). A leaked US diplomatic cable demonstrates that the US government was keenly aware that the choice to back Raziq would undermine the strength of Afghan government institutions, the accountability of security forces and the rule of law (US Embassy, 2010).

As such, the security Raziq has brought to Kandahar may prove little more than a temporary illusion. Kandahar City and the areas surrounding it have seen a significant reduction in violence since 2010 (ICG, 2014). However, the countryside remains increasingly volatile and the available security figures on Kandahar for 2014 do not support the narrative that security is improving. The area immediately to the

¹⁸ Interview with human rights official, Kandahar City, November 2014.

¹⁹ Telephone interview with journalist, Kandahar City, January 2014.

²⁰ Interview with former police official, Kabul, January 2015. See also Gopal (2014a).

west of Kandahar City is seeing higher levels of violence, likely not because of the Taliban but because of competition over the control of routes connecting the capital to opium cultivation areas.²¹ Those with access to the networks of key power-brokers are able to secure release from police custody with bribes, but rivals, or their affiliates, are treated far less leniently.²²

3.4 Current political dynamics

Since Ahmed Wali's death, his brother Shah Wali Karzai, and the current governor, Tooryali Wesa, have gained greater prominence. Shah Wali was initially seen as shy and retiring, unlikely to replace Ahmed Wali as the 'king of Kandahar.' He has surprised many who initially underestimated him, and he has managed to build up a significant network of his own. While he holds no government position, he exercises considerable influence over government institutions. Like his brother, he plays the role of mediator and *khan*, meeting with petitioners each day and helping resolve their problems.

Governor Wesa was born in Kandahar but spent most of his life overseas working as an academic, meaning he had no local constituency when he was appointed to office in 2008. Ahmed Wali's death allowed Wesa to assert himself more strongly in provincial affairs. Although he assumed the role of interlocutor to aid agencies and the international community early on in his governorship, he has been able to pursue this agenda more aggressively since Ahmed Wali's demise. The more outlandish projects Wesa is said to have influenced, along with collaborators in line ministries, include a malaria prevention project in a district that does not generally suffer high levels of malaria (but where the district governor enjoys a very close relationship with Wesa) and a project aiming to provide aid to Kuchis in an area where there is no known Kuchi population.²³ These are not merely poorly planned aid projects but instances where aid money has been used to sustain patron-client networks. Wesa has reportedly routinely pressured aid agencies to direct projects to areas he wants them to work in, hire specific staff and transfer a portion of their funds to him for use on building 'government capacity'.²⁴ Those who refuse to do so are denied permission to work.²⁵

With Ahmed Wali Karzai no longer subsidising their work, Wesa's hold on the line ministries has also solidified.²⁶ MoE, a highly valuable line ministry in political and economic terms, provides an instructive example. Because of insecurity in Kandahar, MoE is unable to directly monitor many of the schools in the province. This provides an opportunity for the creation of 'shadow schools', which exist only on paper but are allocated resources and funding for teachers' salaries and other items. In the past, Ahmed Wali tightly controlled key appointments to MoE.²⁷ Wesa initially struggled to bring MoE under his control, evidenced by the succession of line directors after Ahmed Wali's death. At one point, a high-level official in the governor's office challenged Wesa's appointment of an individual he felt was uneducated and thus unqualified for the job. The high-level official was assassinated soon after, and

²¹ Correspondence with analyst, May 2015.

²² Interview with human rights official, Kandahar City, November 2014.

²³ Interview with government employee, Kandahar City, November 2014.

²⁴ Interview with a local non-governmental organisation worker, Kandahar City, November 2014.

²⁵ Interview with human rights official, Kandahar City, November 2014; interview with aid agency official, Kabul, January 2015.

²⁶ Interview with education department official, Dand, November 2014.

²⁷ Interview with journalist, Kabul, January 2014.

the MoE head was given his position in the governor's office. The subsequent MoE head is a respected Mohmandi elder. A well-known Mohmandi contractor has subsequently begun work on a number of private schools and universities that required MoE approval to be built.²⁸

The Provincial Council, considerably more active during Ahmed Wali's time, has been in disarray since his death. In the years immediately after Ahmed Wali died, it met rarely. Without Ahmed Wali's leadership, some members have created their own small rackets, facilitating development projects negotiating the release of prisoners from jail.²⁹ They continue to act as brokers for state resources but, because each member has a variable amount of influence, the system functions in a much more fragmented way than it did under Ahmed Wali. Unsurprisingly, the last round of Provincial Council elections in 2014 saw Raziq's tribe, the Achakzai, significantly overrepresented.

As long as their interests do not conflict, the council members and governor appear to work well together. In the words of a district security official, 'The relations between the governor and the Provincial Council are very good, they coordinate very well on corruption and share the profits.'³⁰ Where their interests collide, Wesa or his affiliates undermine the council. In a turn of events that is highly unusual in Afghan politics, his wife has publicly derided female provincial councillors, impugning their morality, in response to whispers of her own corrupt activities.³¹ Governor Wesa has ordered the council not to interact directly with line ministry officials, which was previously a core part of their business. In an interview, the governor claimed not to know exactly what the formal role of the Provincial Council was meant to be, but strongly asserted that it was an advisory one.³² A new parliamentary council law passed by Parliament in January 2015 has stripped the Provincial Councils of their monitoring powers, which has significantly weakened the institutions across Afghanistan. More recently, the Provincial Councils fought back and persuaded Ghani to issue an administrative decree restoring some of their powers – yet the decree does not have the status of law and its enforceability is thus weak.³³

Current political dynamics are characterised by a high degree of fragmentation among elites, intermittent confrontation and, when mutually beneficial, collusion. Raziq has not sought to dominate in the way Sherzai and Ahmed Wali did; in doing so, he has allowed greater space for others to operate so long as they do not threaten his interests. This leaves a field of players with greater autonomy and small to medium-sized patron-client networks. As no one power-holder is able to achieve dominance, there is a frequent alternation between collusion and confrontation (dynamics between the provincial governor and the Provincial Council being one prominent example). This allows more individuals access but the access to be had is much more limited, and it is still a relatively closed system. As one local aid worker said, 'If you are Alokozai, you should go to your close Alokozai council member and the same for every other tribe, but if your tribe has no council member you will have no one with influence.'³⁴ The *de facto* role of the council is not to influence policy or to give advisory services to the government but to facilitate – for a price – access to government and informal resources.

The one key factor of change has been the drawdown of international forces, marked by the closure of the PRT in April 2014. There is less to go around, which means there is also less to fight over. Politics in

²⁸ Interview with MoE official, Kandahar City, November 2014; interview with journalist, Kabul, January 2015.

²⁹ Interview with human rights official, Kandahar City, November 2014.

³⁰ Interview with security official, Arghandab, November 2014.

³¹ Interview with human rights official, Kandahar City, November 2014.

³² Interview with provincial governor, Kandahar City, November 2014.

³³ For a more detailed discussion of these developments, see Qaane and Ruttig (2015).

³⁴ Interview with a local non-governmental organisation worker, Kandahar City, November 2014.

Afghanistan at the time of this research was deeply affected by the prospect of drawdown and the impending presidential elections, with many players adopting a 'wait and see' attitude. As Ghani seeks to reform the government and begins to make key appointments at subnational level, this dynamic will most certainly shift again.

Few are satisfied with this closed system of access. Some of the payments made to government officials or key power-brokers are coerced (as in the common case where one might pay to get a relative released from jail), but others are made voluntarily on the expectation that those paying will gain privileged access to opportunities and services. While many actively participate in this system, most Kandaharis are deeply disillusioned by having to pay for something that should be freely available as a service of government or otherwise. Those without access to more powerful networks are deeply resentful of their exclusion, and some have turned to the Taliban in response.

Those who want to work in the government must have access to key power-brokers, just as they always have, but now it is primarily Shah Wali Karzai, Raziq and Wesa who provide this access. According to one Provincial Council member, 'Those related to powerful officials get the jobs, everyone else is discouraged from applying and the civil service commission process is just a little drama.'³⁵ According to another member, this extends to access to even the most basic of services like state clinics and school enrolment: 'If you want better access to services in Kandahar, you need three things: power, money and relations.'³⁶

In late April 2015, a new governor was appointed in Kandahar, Hodayoun Azizi, a little known official who had resided in France and served as minister for parliamentary affairs after returning to Afghanistan. Structurally, much about how access to resources is regulated remains the same (even if the major players have changed). There are, however, exceptions to this model of governance and room to manoeuvre. Several female Provincial Council members have been seen using their limited influence to advocate on behalf of their constituencies and to raise public interest issues with the media. The former mayor of Kandahar City, Ghulam Hamidi, is widely praised. A head of the municipality, the mayor is one of the few subnational government officials mandated to collect taxes. Hamidi increased the city's revenue seven-fold, putting these funds to use with public works projects, and sought to combat land grabs (Chandrasekaran, 2010; Taylor, 2011). He was assassinated in 2011, with the Taliban claiming responsibility.

³⁵ Interview with Provincial Council member, Kandahar City, November 2014.

³⁶ Interview with human rights official, Kandahar City, November 2014.

4 District politics and governance

If the district is the lowest level of recognised government and the channel through which most Afghans interface with officialdom, an examination of how these dynamics play out at that level provides some insight into how elite power dynamics affect their day-to-day lives. Three districts were examined in depth, selected based on either their notable access or their lack of access to key political, economic and resource networks. The intent was to understand how informal access networks functioned alongside and intersected with formal government institutions, and what combined effect the two had on the ability of Afghans to access services and opportunities as well as gain protection.

4.1 Arghandab

Arghandab lies just northwest of Kandahar City, with a paved road connecting the district centre to the city. It is divided by the Arghandab River, irrigated and fertile, with most of its major villages and towns situated along the river. Its 50,000 or so inhabitants are mainly farmers producing pomegranates, grapes and other crops for sale at market. While the district governor estimates the international forces employed some 3,000 residents indirectly or directly, the majority of these jobs are now gone.³⁷

There is a feeling among residents that, despite their close proximity to the provincial capital, they are largely neglected by the central government. Given their relative population and the historical prominence of the tribe, they have a reasonable expectation of playing a larger role.³⁸ Yet the Alokozai have weak links to Kabul and, despite the influence of the late Mullah Naqib, they have largely been excluded from the provincial government (discussed in Section 3). The last influential Alokozai in the provincial government was Khan Mohammad, who served as police chief for the province from 2009 until his assassination in 2011.

Alokozai unsurprisingly dominates key district government positions. Within local politics, there are three key political factions: one led by Haji Shah Mohammad Ahmadi, the district governor and a close associate of President Karzai's late brother, Hashmat Karzai; one led by Niaz Mohammad Mujahid, the district chief of police and brother of Khan Mohammad Mujahid, Raziq's predecessor as police chief before his assassination in 2011; and one led by Kalimullah Alokozai, son of the late leader of the Alokozai tribe.

There are ongoing tensions between the district governor and the police chief, which appear to consume more of their time and energy than the duties associated with their formally mandated roles. The district governor and police chief accuse each other of corruption and the conflict is more or less at a stalemate. The district governor has the backing of the provincial governor, who has directed more development projects to the district since that governor's appointment, along with other powerful figures.³⁹ One of his brothers heads the provincial police commander and the other is a powerful

³⁷ Interview with district governor, Arghandab, November 2014.

³⁸ Interview with local government official, Arghandab, November 2014.

³⁹ Interview with security official, Arghandab, November 2014.

mujahdeen commander. The police chief is closely allied to Kalimullah and to Raziq, who has issued several warnings to the district governor about his allegedly corrupt activities.

While a District Development Assembly (DDA) existed previously, its character shifted with Wesa's appointment as governor. In theory, there should be several District Councils, including a district development *shura*, an *ulema shura* and a poppy eradication *shura*. In reality, all of the major decision-making is made by a roughly consistent core group of the same men.⁴⁰ This includes the district governor, the former head of the DDA and a Popalzai elder from a neighbouring district who had close relations with the late Hashmat Karzai.

The DDA was seen to work in a more transparent and less self-interested way in mediating disputes and facilitating development, whereas it now plays an unusually aggressive role in regulating market access and acts as broker between farmers and traders. Traders receive a disadvantageous deal, having to sell their crops at roughly 30% less than the market price (with council members taking this as their cut of the profits) but there is little they can do. It approaches development projects in the same way and rarely support projects it cannot extract a benefit from. With the National Solidarity Program (NSP), the council must approve all proposed projects. There are credible allegations that it has inflated the number of the villages in the district by around 13% and takes around a quarter of the grants allocated to Community Development Councils (CDCs).⁴¹

Meanwhile, few villages have any access to electricity and there are about three health clinics, all poorly functioning and hard to reach from more remote areas of the district. An Afghan Local Police (ALP) unit has been set up. On the surface, elders requested it. In reality, it is loyal to the former head of the District Council and the district governor. It has set up checkpoints in more insecure areas, extorting food and money from the local population and threatening to put residents on a list of Taliban if they do not comply. District security officials have expressed concerns about the ALP but there has been little they can do to rein them in.⁴²

4.2 Dand

Dand district lies just to the south of Kandahar City. Home to KAF and easy to reach by road from the city, it is in many ways an extension of the provincial capital. Like many of the other districts immediately surrounding Kandahar City, Dand enjoys proximity to the services and economic opportunities in the centre as well as inclusion in Kandahar City's current security bubble. While some residents farm, many work in the city or are reliant on trade or other businesses for income. The border with Panjwai district to the west is insecure, with the majority of the district's security forces based there. The tribal composition is a mix of Barakzai and Popalzai, with some Achakzai and other groups present.

Many key power-holders have strong links to Dand. Gul Agha Sherzai is from the district and the Karzai family is from Karz village. However, the district hardly benefits from these linkages in any tangible way. There is a paved road directly into Karz but few otherwise and a lack of health care and many other

⁴⁰ Interview with security official, Arghandab, November 2014.

⁴¹ Interview with journalist, Kabul, January 2015.

⁴² Interview with district security official, Arghandab, November 2014.

services that are more easily accessed in the city. The previous district governor resigned, citing lack of attention to the district and the government's failure to pay district staff salaries (TOLONews, 2012).

A more recent factor in Dand's neglect stems from a conflict between the district governor, Hashim Agha, and the provincial governor. Agha was previously district governor of Zhari district. Agha's brother was a *mujahdeen* commander who helped Karzai travel covertly into Afghanistan after 9/11, but Agha lacks his brother's connections. While appointed by Karzai, he essentially had to enforce his own appointment against the governor's wishes and with several armed men, courtesy of his brother, in tow.⁴³ Given the profitability and prestige of a posting in the border district of Spin Boldak, his transfer to Dand was likely a disappointment. Agha belongs to a respected religious family, which earns him some tribute from Dand residents, but has few useful connections in the provincial or central government and residents complain he has done little for them.

The police chief, Baryali Safi, is from Parwan province, meaning he also possesses little influence and access to resources. He is generally well respected, seen as staying out of affairs where his intervention is undesired and allowing the District Council to mediate disputes.⁴⁴ He was generally praised for establishing an ALP unit at the request of elders. Unlike in Arghandab, the Dand ALP unit patrols only the more insecure parts of district and reports directly to him; he controls salaries and ensures the unit works closely with the Afghan National Police.

4.3 Spin Boldak

Spin Boldak lies southwest of Kandahar City, on the road linking it to Quetta. Spin Boldak border crossing, near the bustling town of Wesh, is a major site for the import and export of goods to Pakistan. It is partly desert and poorly irrigated, meaning agriculture is limited. Most residents earn an income from industries focused around the border trade. Spin Boldak has benefited from generous international assistance focused on security objectives and 'hearts and minds' activities, particularly in the villages along the major road from the border to Kandahar City.

The tribal composition is a mix of Achakzai and Noorzai, but the Achakzai dominate government and economic activities. Spin Boldak is Raziq's home district and his brother, Atuaddin Achakzai, acts as his proxy at the local level. Few important decisions in governance or economic life occur without his approval.⁴⁵ The district governor, Saeed Ali, is a Barakzai from Maruf district. He has served across Kandahar as a governor in various districts and fought during the war with Sherzai's men. The chief of police is a former bodyguard of Raziq's. Both men talked freely about not taking any decisions without the explicit or implicit consent of Raziq or his brother.⁴⁶

More significantly, Raziq's brother regulated unofficial taxation and economic activity centred on the border trade. Roughly 60% of trucks crossing the border in either direction circumvent the official

⁴³ Interview with local government official, Spin Boldak, December 2014.

⁴⁴ Interview with local government official, Spin Boldak, December 2014.

⁴⁵ Interviews with various government officials and local elders, Spin Boldak, December 2014.

⁴⁶ Interview with district governor, Spin Boldak, December 2014; interview with district police chief, Spin Boldak, December 2014.

customs process. Through a parallel informal process regulated by men believed to be affiliated with Raziq's brother, larger trucks are taxed AFS120,000 (\$2,000) and smaller trucks AFS80,000 (\$1,400).⁴⁷ The drawdown has created new opportunities. The export to Pakistan of containers of scrap metal and other materials discarded as a result of ISAF base closures has become a lucrative business. The bulk of this business is overseen by the major Kandahari contractors who have dominated the provision of services to international forces, including a well-known contractor named Zhed Gulalai.⁴⁸

The District Councils play a more clearly organised role in district governance. Raziq's brother influences their decisions, for example with regard to CDC projects or other development activities. Raziq's brother and close associates, including some of those on the District Council, take a lead role in dispute resolution. During his time as commander of the border police in Spin Boldak, Raziq established a system of dispute resolution with fixed fines and penalties, ranging from AFS30,000 to AFS400,000 (from \$520 to \$7,000), which remains in place.⁴⁹ They do not appear to take a cut of these activities. They do, however, oversee unofficial transport taxes from the border to Kandahar City. Any unregistered vehicle, of which there are around 25 to 30 a day, must pay AFS100.⁵⁰ The driver receives an official-looking slip of paper, which they then present to police in Kandahar City in order to gain entry. It is unclear how much of this income the council keeps and how the funds are distributed.

4.4 Implications for district governance

Government institutions or offices matter little on their own, and indeed vary significantly in terms of what they can provide across districts. Nonetheless, the District Council was broadly seen as the most representative of various tribal groups and potentially the most effective in advocating for and meeting the needs of Afghans. In contrast with the position of district governor, which has existed in some form for centuries, District Councils are a relatively new development. If appointed officials are seen as an extension of the central state (and in some cases the governor), District Councils are seen as the representatives of the people. Unfortunately, the position of District Councils *vis-à-vis* the provincial government and their authority to bring complaints or make requests of various government institutions, including the Provincial Council and line ministries, remain unclear and limit any authority they may have in an official sense. They must still rely on their relationships with key power-holders in government to resolve disputes and mediate access to central government resources.

The most well-off of the three districts is Spin Boldak, in large part because of its links to the most powerful individual in the province. The district has consolidated local political order, good security, access to local resources and economic opportunities provided by trade and a strong link to the provincial centre of power through Raziq. This order cannot be considered stable or inclusive, though, given that it largely excludes the Noorzai population. It is not institutions but relationships that enable access to resources and services, as the case of Spin Boldak illustrates.

⁴⁷ Interview with government official, Spin Boldak, December 2014.

⁴⁸ Interview with government official, Spin Boldak, December 2014; interview with journalist, Kabul, January 2015. For more on Gulalai, see Gopal (2010).

⁴⁹ Interview with former government official, Spin Boldak, December 2014.

⁵⁰ Interview with former government official, Spin Boldak, December 2014.

These access networks fall most frequently along ethnic or tribal lines (as with the Achakzai in Spin Boldak), meaning some districts have been distinctly privileged over others. The marginalisation of tribes in Arghandab, along with Panjwai, Maiwand and other districts, by the ruling Popalzai, Barakzai and Achakzai tribes, results in poorer outcomes and opportunities for those living there. As in the case of Dand, having local power-holders in residence or with some geographic tie does not guarantee better outcomes. In Dand, resources – its economic opportunities, government positions and local government structures – have been used as sources of patronage for others. Little has been left to trickle down to the people who actually live there. However, geographic proximity to an urban centre (such as with Arghandab and Dand and proximity to Kandahar City) can help mitigate the impact of neglect seen in places like Maruf, Nesh and Arghistan.

Like broader subnational governance efforts in Afghanistan, intensive efforts focused on district-level governance (particularly during the military surge in 2010-2012) have failed to adequately address the impact of these access networks. The underlying assumption appears to have been that either there was nothing there or what was there could easily be transformed into an accountable, representative and citizen-oriented system. This aspiration is entirely at odds with the underlying rationale of how district power structures function. There are multiple competing interests and a complex system of power being negotiated and renegotiated on an ongoing basis. International efforts to improve district-level governance have all too often focused on districts in isolation from their broader contexts, neglecting to consider how district issues may fall within the local or regional axes of power. The following section looks at what can be done to address this.

5 Conclusion

Evidence from Kandahar suggests the government is not composed of institutions but of personality- and tribal-based networks of access. These power-holders have profoundly shaped the process of state-building, overwhelmingly subverted government institutions and ultimately undermined the ability of nascent institutions to serve the needs of Afghans. There is a veneer of formal rules and, at times, of reform, but the informal networks that govern access to state and non-state resources have been durably resistant to this kind of change.

In Kandahar, the closed nature of this access system has been particularly destabilising. First, key groups, based along tribal lines, have been almost entirely excluded from government. Far from being representative of the population, governing bodies (such as the Provincial Council and to some extent the District Council) are representative only of dominant patron–client networks. This minimal redistribution renders the system inherently volatile and has created a multitude of openings for the insurgency. Second, elites collude when mutually beneficially but they are also fiercely – and, often, violently – competitive. This violent competition by ostensibly pro-government actors, with political assassinations often confused for or understood as Taliban violence, fed the rampant insecurity that characterised Kandahar until recently. It has also lowered expectations of what the government will or can provide, making figures such as Raziq appear to be part of the solution, in spite of growing reports of his and his proxies’ human rights abuses.

Most Kandaharis are deeply disillusioned by this system and resentful of the power these individuals wield, even where they actively participate in perpetuating it. One comment from an interview subject concisely summarises this logic:

*If I vote for this honest person, I am sure he will not be able to resolve my problems. If the police take a member of my family, he will not be able to get them released. But if I vote for someone like Khakrezwal [the current head of the Provincial Council], he will be able to get my family member released from the police or even the NDS with one phone call. Now why would I vote for a person who will not be able to resolve my problems?*⁵¹

Some of the payments made to government officials are coerced (as when one pays to have a relative released from jail) but others are made voluntarily on the expectation that the payer will gain privileged access to opportunities and services.

There is a broader debate in the literature on warlords and strongmen about whether such individuals can be incentivised, or even coerced, to provide public goods or contribute to ‘good’ governance. Reno (1998) asserts they are loyal only to private interests, whereas Marten (2012) argues they may provide public goods where it benefits them. The case of Kandahar finds little evidence to support Marten’s assertion. Key figures in the province have provided benefits only to those in their access networks. Even such gestures as Sherzai’s increasing of teachers’ salaries was largely limited to those within privileged access networks, as they likely comprise the majority of those able to gain salaries as

⁵¹ Interview with a local non-governmental organisation worker, Kandahar City, November 2014.

teachers. If some public good has arisen as a result of this political manoeuvring, it has likely been little more than an all-but-unintended side-effect.

Any viable strategy to build state institutions must deal with the threat power-holders pose in order to create space for the formation of independent institutions. It is unlikely these actors can be converted or incentivised to reform. While it may be ultimately destabilising to marginalise elites entirely, they can be disempowered and undermined. This would require a strategy to obstruct their access to resources and their control of the networks that sustain them. Such a strategy would comprise excluding them from access to foreign military support and preventing them from controlling or accessing international aid; imposing central state control over border resources; and strengthening state security forces and the institutions that control them, which would include preventing the creation of personal or informal militias.

Since 2001, the international community has done the opposite. First, Sherzai, Ahmed Wali and Raziq all received significant military support. Without it, they would not have been able to establish their degree of dominance over provincial affairs. International military support has also been integral to these, and other, actors building the quasi-private security forces that have helped them consolidate power and perpetuate insecurity and/or human rights abuses. International military support also provided them with legitimacy as well as income, generally from side businesses in contracting and service provision.

Second, control of border crossings and road checkpoints has been essential to creating revenue streams and income-earning opportunities, through the taxation of both licit and illicit goods, to sustain patron–client networks. A significant share of Kandahar’s border revenue never reaches the state, yet rectifying this has always been subservient to security interests in the border areas. Raziq’s prominence was helped by the fact that he brought security to the area, allowing convoys bound for KAF and other international military bases to travel from Pakistan through Kandahar relatively safely.

Finally, nearly all of the powerful men in key government positions in Kandahar since 2001 are alleged to have maintained or sanctioned secret prisons, to have overseen brutal paramilitary or quasi-official security forces who have used torture and executed captives and to have used state forces and/or their security apparatus to target political, tribal and economic rivals. ALP, as it is currently configured, presents new and dangerous opportunities for quasi-state security forces to continue this pattern. All of these tactics have been carried with substantial (if, at times, unwitting) support from US and other international forces.

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