

POWER TO THE PERIPHERY? THE ELUSIVE CONSENSUS ON HOW TO DECENTRALISE AFGHANISTAN

Michael Semple

*Senior Fellow at the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy,
Harvard Kennedy School*

1. Context

In June 2012, a maverick former Member of the Afghan Parliament appeared on television in Kabul and declared that, while attending an opposition rally, he had apprehended that the movement's advocacy of decentralised democracy amounted to a campaign to break up Afghanistan's unitary state. The opposition dismissed the criticism as groundless and revealed evidence that the national intelligence service had orchestrated the MP's claims.

The clash was just a minor episode in the complex controversy over how to decentralise Afghanistan. It illustrates three characteristic features of the decentralisation controversy:

Firstly the issues around decentralisation are highly topical.

Secondly there is a tradition of manipulation and misrepresentation in the debate.

Thirdly the debate is highly polarised.

The reason for the acrimony in the decentralisation debate is that it tends to proxy for other contentious issues. In conventional political rhetoric, Afghan Pashtun leaders equate the preservation of strong central government with the protection of their leading role in the state. Therefore proposals for democratisation and decentralisation, which would be inoffensive in other contexts, can, in the polarised Afghan debate, be construed as challenging the fundamental rationale of the state.

Traditional controversy aside, the latest focus on decentralisation in Afghanistan arises from the challenges of the transition process. The underlying issue is what changes to the structure of government might give Afghanistan the best chance of coping with the withdrawal of NATO forces. Decentralisation has emerged as one of the possible governance solutions on the basis that re-balancing power between centre and periphery might help overcome alienation of groups that have hitherto opted out of the political system and provide for broader-based participation.

Michael Semple is a scholar and practitioner focused on conflict resolution in Afghanistan and South Asia. He is a Senior Fellow at the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy, Harvard Kennedy School and has previously worked for the European Union and United Nations.

This paper considers the prospects for decentralisation to contribute to a more viable political system in Afghanistan.

It does this firstly by identifying the scope of debate on decentralisation and the principal models of decentralisation available to contemporary Afghanistan (Section 2). It then highlights how centre-periphery tensions have been addressed in the development of the Afghan state (Section 3). It considers how the issue of decentralisation is dealt with in Afghan political rhetoric (Section 4). It goes on to outline current government practice in terms of centre-periphery roles and responsibilities (Section 5). It addresses the political economy of centralisation and decentralisation, including how this tension relates to ethnic competition, the identity of the state, and control over patronage resources (Section 6). It then identifies the main decentralisation policy options and how to pursue them (Sections 7 and 8). The paper places the idea of Afghan decentralisation in the regional context, with a particular focus on Pakistan (Sections 9 and 10). Finally, the paper considers the road ahead and which approach to the decentralisation debate is most likely to advance the cause of Afghan peace and stability (Section 11).

2. The Contemporary Centralisation–Decentralisation Debate

Government in Afghanistan is organised on three levels. Central government includes the presidency, a council of ministers and their ministries (the executive), plus the national parliament. The second tier of government is the province. The senior-most official in each of the thirty-four provinces (*wilayat*) is a governor, or *wali*, alongside an elected advisory council. The third tier of government is the district or *uluswali*. The provinces are sub-divided into an average of eight districts each. The senior-most official in the district is the *uluswal*. Although the constitution provides for elections to district councils, no such elections have ever been held and instead various ad hoc district councils have emerged alongside the appointed *uluswals*. *Walis* and *uluswals* are all appointed by the centre, under the authority of the President and wield considerable power within the areas they administer.

The contemporary debate on decentralisation revolves around a series of practical issues on how to reorganise these structures of democratic government.

The most concrete proposal for decentralisation is simply that district and provincial governors should be elected by the people in the areas they serve, rather than appointed by the President. In this sense decentralisation would be effected by democratisation. Support for the idea of decentralisation has also often been linked to support for enhancing the role of parliament relative to the presidency. Other practical proposals for decentralisation include the idea of strengthening the sub-national tiers of government, by expanding their role and enhancing their access to resources. At this level of practical proposals, the debate on decentralisation thus does not readily divide into mutually exclusive visions of a centralised versus a decentralised state. The mainstream debate is really about degrees of decentralisation, rather than for-or-against. Meanwhile the issue of the possible merits of a federal system is treated as 'off limits' in the mainstream debate. Instead,

participants in this debate take the unitary state as given and consider how best to organise it. However, this does not stop commentators periodically denouncing others as being federalist, even if the person criticised has never explicitly advocated federalism.

3. Centralisation & Decentralisation in Afghanistan's Constitutional History

The tension between centre and periphery has been one of the key themes in the development of the Afghan state since its foundation in 1747.

The state's founder, Ahmad Shah, and his successors manoeuvred to gain some autonomy for the sovereign relative to the powerful Durrani tribal leaders on whom they originally depended for military force and political support. Some of the early moves by Afghan sovereigns to strengthen the centre relative to power-brokers included shifting the capital from Kandahar to Kabul, employing a force of Persian mercenaries and inducting other Pashtun tribes (the Ghilzai) into the power structure. Meanwhile, Ahmad Shah's successive conquests gave the territorial building blocks of the Afghan state. The territories Ahmad Shah incorporated into the empire were designated as provinces and generally governed by a prince. The nucleus of central government formed around the court. At the end of the nineteenth century Amir AbdurRahman (ruled 1880-1901) took advantage of external (British) backing to launch a process of internal consolidation. This involved a series of military campaigns to assert his control throughout the remaining Afghan territory and resulted in him achieving more autonomy for the centre than any of his predecessors.

The original struggle for autonomy pitted Pashtun kings primarily against other Pashtun powerbrokers. However the territory over which AbdurRahman consolidated control included a multi-ethnic population, with Uzbeks, Tajiks and Hazaras constituting a majority in the north and centre. The strategy adopted for extending government across this multi-ethnic space has been characterised as "internal colonialism". The main aspects of Afghan internal colonialism were that the rulers reserved jobs in the area administration and officer corps for a Pashtun elite and used grants of land or grazing rights to Pashtuns in the centre and north and along the borders to plant loyal populations.

Subsequent Afghan rulers maintained the unitary structure of government which had consolidated under AbdurRahman.

During the twentieth century a series of constitutions augmented this structure by developing a constitutional monarchy and eventually a republic and adding a parliament. The first clause of King Amanullah's 1923 constitution states "*All parts and areas of the country are under the authority of His Majesty the King and are to be treated as a single unit without discrimination between different parts of the country*". This constitution also provided for provincial councils, with a mix of appointed and elected members, to advise on the development of their areas and channel petitions regarding the performance of government officials. The constitution prescribed "decentralisation of authority" as the first principle under which the provinces would be governed. The operationalisation of decentralisation within the context of the Afghan

unitary state meant that ministries were to establish a presence in the provinces and try to deal with residents' issues at that level, without the need for referral to the capital. The next major innovation came in 1931 under Nadir Shah (ruled 1929-1933), with the establishment of a bi-cameral national parliament, with members from all administrative units of the country. Under Nadir Shah, these sub-national units consisted of divisions (*naibulhukumat*), major provinces (*hukumat e ala*) and minor provinces (*hukumat e kalan*). Zahir Shah's constitution from 1964 is famous as the country's most liberal constitution, as it incorporated an elaborate charter of citizens' rights. However it also proclaimed the operative principle to be one of "centralisation" and maintained continuity in the structure of the state. The king appointed a prime minister and council of ministers at the centre, who in turn appointed provincial administrations. At the centre, parliament had power to legislate. But in the provinces elected councils served merely to advise the administration on development and welfare. Zahir Shah simultaneously presided over a major reorganisation of sub-national administrative units. The 1964 reform replaced Nadir Shah's sub-national structure of five major and four minor provinces with a shift to twenty-six, much smaller, provinces. Daud Khan's constitution, adopted in 1977, only operated for a year before the revolution. It went even further than its predecessors in concentration of power in that it dropped all reference to provincial administration or elected provincial councils and proclaimed that Afghanistan is administered according to the principle of centralisation. After the 1978 coup successive governments further proliferated administrative divisions, so that modern Afghan provinces span a smaller proportion of the national territory and economy than their predecessors and their administrations are far smaller than that of the central government. Although the rebellions against central government after 1978 allowed the emergence of several de facto autonomous areas, all of these, except an enclave in the North East, collapsed by 1998. For their last three years the Taliban restored the old administrative structures and ruled Afghanistan along traditional centralised lines.

The post-Taliban political order was based on the 2001 Bonn Accord which took as its template for provisional government structures the 1964 constitution, minus provisions referring to the monarchy. This implied a unitary state, organised on the principle of centralisation, with provincial administrations appointed by the centre. The elected components had to await the later constitution-making. Meanwhile, however, the government established by Bonn continued the proliferation process by adding a 33rd province (Panjshir) and 34th (Daikondi).

4. Why Decentralisation is Offensive to the Status Quo

Firstly, the successive twentieth century constitutions clearly established centralisation within the framework of a unitary state as the "status quo" position. Advocacy of any innovation, such as elected provincial governors, therefore involves challenging almost a century of constitutional tradition.

Secondly, even when discussions on structure of the state are conducted without reference to ethnic categories, participants in the Afghan debate

assume that positions correlate with ethnic politics. Pashtun political figures have favoured the unitary state to safeguard their collective interest. They have historically been dominant at the centre and have been able to use that dominance to protect the position of Pashtun minorities in the northern or central provinces. Conversely, advocates of more power to the provinces are open to suspicions of deliberately trying to weaken Pashtun power. It is in this sense that debate of decentralisation is widely understood to be a proxy for ethnic politics.

Thirdly, there is a long tradition of cultivated xenophobia in Afghan nationalist discourse. One of the traditional themes is that of foreign powers trying to dismember the country and refusing to accept Afghanistan as a unitary state. It is therefore relatively easy for Afghan commentators to suggest links between discussion of decentralisation and this pre-defined existential threat.

Finally the provinces, at least their pre-1964 versions, have a history longer than the Afghan state and have previously been incorporated into other polities – Persia’s Khorasan, the Khanates of Central Asia and the Moghul Empire. Therefore critics of decentralisation have been able to raise fears that it could open the way for secession by the old provinces.

5. The Structure of Government & the Current State of Decentralisation

The current structure of government in Afghanistan is based on the 2004 constitution. This is typically described as being one of the most centralised models in the world because of the concentration of power in the presidency. However in reality, the December 2003 *loya Jirga* resulted in a rather nuanced constitutional settlement. The main issues at stake were the balance of power between the president and the parliament, and the relationship between language and national identity. The debate did not extend to any serious challenge to the unitary nature of the state or proposals for devolution or federalism. Instead those who wanted to challenge the concentration of power in the presidency argued for strengthening of the power of the parliament. Ethnic blocks consolidated among the delegates during the constitutional debate, with Pashtuns tending to back the original draft and non-Pashtuns tending to back amendments. Eventually the agreement took the form of a grand bargain. The centralised system remained, but parliamentary powers were augmented with some additional checks over the executive. The languages of the small ethnic groups received official recognition, but a national anthem was adopted in Pashto.

In keeping with the precedent set in the 1923 constitution, the 2004 constitution provides for advisory provincial councils, as well as elected bodies at the district level and in municipalities. Subsequent legislation to establish the powers of the councils deliberately kept them toothless. However the elected councils adopted roles in their provinces which reflected varying local realities. The classic example was Kandahar Province, where Ahmad Wali Karzai, brother of the President, became chairman, and the provincial council won acceptance as one of the important political players in the province. In other provinces, governors found it expedient to co-opt councils as part of a strategy of outreach to the local population.

Meanwhile a spectrum of non-constitutional bodies, supported by central government and donors, occupied some of the space which the constitution had anticipated would belong to elected councils.

Actual practice of governance has been somewhat more decentralised in practice than was provided for in the 2004 constitution. This is because the ability of central government to enforce its will over local elites has been constrained by under-developed institutions. The writ of the Afghan state extends to the multiple administrative centres but not to the rural hinterland surrounding them. The central government has found it expedient to accommodate interest groups at the provincial level. The classic example of this is in Balkh Province, where one of the local strongmen who helped expel the Taliban in 2001 has had a long tenure as governor and has thus emerged as one of the key power-brokers in the north and successfully presided over stability and economic development. Likewise, although district governors, *uluswals*, are also supposed to receive appointments from the centre, many provincial governors have managed to wrest control of appointment power, by inserting supposedly temporary caretakers and fending off attempts by the centre to send “officially” appointed replacements.

Ministries remain entirely centralised in the sense of retaining budgeting, planning and decision making in the capital. Insofar as they deploy personnel to the provinces, these teams are subject to the authority of Kabul and are merely there in a service delivery role. But as another example of the variety in practice of centre-periphery relations, the big service delivery ministries and security organs have found it cost effective to establish regional hubs. They use the hubs, in the main cities, which roughly correspond to the Nadir Shah era administrative centres, to provide logistics and management support to surrounding provinces.

6. The Issues at Stake

Demands within Afghanistan for reform of state structures and decentralisation are driven by a range of interests and concerns. Some of the proposals for decentralisation are ostensibly technical and related to generic ideas on governance as advocated in many countries, but nonetheless raise fundamental issues over the identity of the state power distribution within it.

(i) The balance of power in the multi-ethnic state

Stances on decentralisation versus centralisation have come to stand as a proxy for national level distribution of power. The alignment of political interests witnessed in the 2003 constitutional debate on presidential versus parliamentary systems is now reflected in the debate over decentralisation. The strongest support for continuation of the centralised system comes from Pashtun groups, in keeping with the traditional idea that a strong central government is the best guarantee of Pashtun privilege. The strongest support for decentralisation comes from Uzbek, Hazara or Tajik leaders who have concluded that shifting

power away from Kabul would safeguard their control of the non-Pashtun majority areas of the North and Centre. This is primarily a defensive strategy intended to insulate them from developments in the Pashtun majority areas where they consider the rise of pro-Taliban sympathy to be a threat to their security and ideas of social policy.

(ii) The politics of appointments and the relationship between elected bodies and appointed officials

A more concrete concern in the politics of decentralisation is the issue of control over appointments. Given the much-noted dominance of patronage relationships in Afghanistan, control over public sector appointments is fundamental to political practice. Centralisation of appointment authority has been important in the emergence of a national level patronage system, which revolves around Kabul. Local power-brokers anywhere in the country wanting to get their clients appointed to positions such as the district police chief or *uluswal* have been obliged to travel to Kabul and engage with the power structure there, directly lobbying contacts in the presidential palace, the Ministry of Interior, or Members of Parliament. Those advocating decentralisation hope to shift control of appointments away from the centre and to make appointments subject to democratic accountability within the provinces.

(iii) Natural resources and revenues

The geography of sources of public revenue and exploitable natural resources underlies the decentralisation debate. Historically, one of the principal sources of revenue available to the Afghan state has been the customs on trade passing through the main border crossings. During the civil war of the 1990's, control over these border crossings provided the revenue required to run the most successful de facto autonomous regions. The Eastern provinces depended on the Torkham customs post. The Western provinces depended on the Islamqala and Torghundi customs posts and the North Western provinces depended on the Heiraton customs post. The process of restoration of central authority after 2001 involved wresting control of these customs revenues from the "strong-men", who initially controlled the main provinces after the fall of the Taliban.

In the future, control of minerals extraction can be expected to be a major issue between centre and provinces. Minerals are widely distributed in Afghanistan. However, easily exploitable fossil fuels are mainly located in the North. The potential of this to become an issue in the decentralisation debate was amply and immediately illustrated in June 2012, when government figures orchestrated complaints against General Dostam for disrupting work on an oil contract in northern Saripol Province. Although in this case, the complaints seemed to be stage-managed as part of government tactical dealing with the opposition, they highlighted real issues over the ability of central government to maintain consent to its award of contracts in far-flung provinces if employment benefits do not reach the people of the areas where mining activities take place.

(iv) Accountability of service provision

One version of the case for decentralisation simply relates it to the process of governance reform. It promises to boost accountability of public servants to the constituencies they serve. Under the current system, administrators and ministry officials serve at the pleasure of appointment authorities far from their place of duty. Their tenure and promotion depend upon maintaining the blessing of superiors in Kabul, something which is a function of their ability to access the patronage politics of the capital. The case for having locally elected officials is simply that it would give district electorates an opportunity to reward officials they trusted to deliver on local needs and to remove those who failed to deliver.

(v) Divergent cultural impulses

Despite Afghanistan's high degree of religious homogeneity, there is also a significant degree of cultural diversity. This means that the cultural attributes of leaders or officials who are likely to inspire public confidence, and public expectations of how the administration will accommodate the idea of socially acceptable behaviour, varies from district to district. In part this correlates with ethnicity – each ethnic group has its own version of customary law. Patterns of religious observance, the role of the clergy, ideas on the role of women, all vary by ethnic group and across areas. The most stark contrasts however are not inter-ethnic, but between urban and rural populations. The system of appointing officials centrally means that there is no guarantee that those appointed will be socially acceptable, or will accommodate local practices. Ultimately, it is this aspect of centralisation which has given rise to some of the fears of a political accommodation of the Taliban. Critics of the Taliban seek safeguards against Taliban sympathisers being appointed to administer those areas where people considered Taliban enforced religious observance to be alien to their way of life.

(vi) The power of the “warlords” and the “mafia”

A specific set of historic circumstances in the wake of the collapse of the PDPA government in 1992 opened the way for the de facto regional administrations of the 1990's. One of the reasons for widespread support for the restoration of central authority during the 2002-4 period was a desire to prevent any return to an era of warlord supremacy. The reality of governance under the renewed centralised system has fallen far short of expectations. Nevertheless, proponents of centralisation have continued to invoke the negative associations of the warlord era.

(vii) Migration, markets and economic rights

Decentralisation has potentially serious implications for many Afghans' livelihood strategies. Maps showing ethnically defined settlement patterns (Pashtuns in the south and east, Hazaras in the centre, Uzbeks in the north etc) seriously under-state the extent to which these groups operate

within a national space and have developed livelihood strategies which depend upon labour and commodity markets around the country. Thus, for example, Pashtuns trade in the North and Hazaras labour in Kabul and the North and buy land in the West. Although there is little economic content to the decentralisation schemes currently in vogue, Pashtun elites can be expected to back a centralised system as the best guarantee of their continued economic access to the non-Pashtun majority areas.

(viii) The social and economic basis of Afghanistan's administrative units

Afghanistan's sub-national units tend to have well established corporate identities, with a capacity to transcend arbitrary schemes to reform, consolidate or sub-divide them. The contemporary scheme of provinces and districts is superimposed upon a complex history of government in the region. There is an underlying economic, social and physical geographic logic, relating to historic trade patterns and cultural boundaries and to the status of administrative centres. The principal administrative centres - Nadir Shah's provinces, or Zahir Shah's grade one provinces - were mainly major commercial centres serving a large hinterland. This applies to Kandahar, Herat, MazariSherif, Gardez and Kabul itself. Cities like Herat and MazariSherif also function as religious and cultural centres and network hubs for the population.

7. The Decentralisation Agenda

Decentralisation and the art of the possible

Remarkably few concrete proposals for decentralising the Afghan state have emerged within Afghanistan itself, despite the perpetual questioning of the role of the presidency and central government. However any progress towards decentralisation can be expected to be guided by ideas which have emerged in Afghan politics. Internationally, approaches to decentralisation have embraced both devolution and federalism. Devolution preserves the notion of a unitary state, with sovereignty exercised exclusively by the central government, which can choose, at its discretion, to pass administrative functions and decisions to sub-national tiers of government. Under federalism, sovereignty is shared between the national government and sub-national units and the allocation of responsibility between them is governed by a compact which the centre is not free to abrogate unilaterally. In the realm of practical politics Afghan schemes for decentralisation tend to be limited schemes of devolution, stopping far short of anything which could be considered federalism. Afghanistan has many of the characteristics which have pushed other countries to embrace federalism, such as a high degree of ethno-linguistic diversity and geographically distinct regions. However, the near-sacrosanct status of the notion of the unitary state in Afghan political discourse means that federalism has little practical relevance and that realistic options for decentralisation are confined to limited devolution of powers and functions from the centre.

Role adjustment of sub-national structures: the status quo versions of decentralisation

The Independent Directorate for Local Government (IDLG) is the government body charged with overseeing the development of sub-national structures. It has prepared a reform and development policy for local government. IDLG proposed measures work within the existing constitutional framework and administrative boundaries but anticipate an incremental expansion of the role of provincial councils and activation of councils at the district and village level. They focus on management of the relationship between the provincial councils and the provincial governors and their administrations. The spirit of the IDLG policy is a reinforcement of the provincial council role in advising on local development. However, it proposes to make them more effective by mandating oversight of the executive agencies at the provincial level. It also envisages a role for provincial councils in budgeting, through scrutiny and budget requests to be submitted by the provincial authorities to the centre.

Elected local officials – an opposition approach to decentralisation

The core opposition proposal so far articulated is that the senior officials at provincial and district levels, the *walis* and *uluswals*, should be directly elected, in a break with Afghan administrative tradition of central appointment. If ever enacted, the proposal would represent a major transfer of power from the centre to the periphery in that *uluswals* and *walis* wield considerable formal and informal power, and control over their appointment is fundamental to the way in which the central government extends its writ in the provinces. A central government obliged to approach elected governors to implement its policies would be a significantly weaker government than anticipated in the 2004 constitution. As an example of the caution which the political opposition has adopted in advocating decentralisation, their current proposals for elected sub-national officials do not question the existing sub-national boundaries. They have thus stopped short of advocating reverting to the pre-1964 era boundaries, a proposal which might create more viable sub-national government units and thus risk alarming the guardians of the unitary state.

Empowering the informal - bottom-up approaches to decentralisation

An alternative approach to decentralisation addresses practices of governance, rather than formal government structures. This draws on the insight that Afghanistan functions best when communities are enabled to exercise a high degree of self-government themselves with limited interaction with the formal state. This approach calls on central government to recognise the worth of informal community structures operating at the village level, and to instruct administrators to shift to a more consultative approach in concert with these *shuras* and *jirgas*, and to favour approaches to service delivery and even security in which community organisations take much of the responsibility. The IDLG policy endorses much of the spirit of the bottom-up proposals although there is scant evidence that this endorsement has been reflected in administrative practice.

8. Routes to Reform

How decentralisation might be enacted

One of the key issues facing proponents of decentralisation is how to enact their proposals.

Any radical version of decentralisation that implied changes to the structure of the state could only be achieved through constitutional amendment passed in a *Loya Jirga*, the electoral college empowered for this purpose. The difficulty of maintaining a political consensus to push through constitutional amendments would constitute a significant obstacle to any scheme which required such restructuring. However, there is ample scope for progress towards decentralisation within the 2004 constitution. The schemes for decentralisation, outlined above, which are already within the realm of practical politics, could be adopted without constitutional change. They depend upon reforming the roles and appointment procedures of sub-national entities which are already provided for in the constitution. Both the IDLG and opposition schemes could be enacted through legislation.

Taliban reconciliation and the impetus towards decentralisation

The increased discussion of decentralisation options since about 2010 has been occasioned by the anticipation of an eventual accommodation between the Taliban insurgents and the existing Kabul-based political order. Some of the proponents of such an accommodation have argued that decentralisation offers a mechanism through which political blocs with sharply differing conceptions of the state and how public life should be organised could be accommodated in a cohesive political order. The underlying rationale is that if the Taliban were to achieve influence in Pashtun majority areas such as the South, South East and East, they could shape social or cultural policy and development strategies in those provinces, leaving non-Taliban majorities in the other regions to manage their provinces according to local politics and traditions. Although the distribution of power at the centre and control of remaining issues of national policy would still be open to contest, a devolved set-up accommodating the differing political blocs would increase the prospects of reaching this agreement at the centre. The opposition proposals for elected local officials accord with the spirit of this form of pluralism through decentralisation. However, there is no evidence of Taliban support for such schemes as they have tended to favour the traditional Pashtun political ideas of the unitary state and a strong central government.

A classic example of a scheme which has entered the political debate but which, for now, lies beyond the realm of practical politics is that of US Ambassador Blackwill, calling for de facto partition. This would allow the North to disassociate itself from the South if the latter seems set to be taken over by the Taliban. In terms of paths to change, the quasi-partition proposal illustrates the point that a failure to adopt reforms adequate to avert a crisis could precipitate extra-constitutional measures, little short of secession, when the crisis hit. Because of the risk of a political crisis prompting such unilateral action, the conclusions below point to the importance of consensus-building.

9. The Relevance of the Pakistan Experience of Devolution

Pakistan's experience of reform of government structures is relevant to Afghanistan, both because there are significant similarities in the cultural context and because a large proportion of Afghans are familiar with Pakistan. Pakistan is also a multi-ethnic state which has struggled to accommodate competing visions of the state and ethnic interest groups. There is an important caveat in that Pakistan and Afghanistan have differing institutional histories and experiences of colonialism. However, the experiments in decentralisation in Pakistan under the decade of rule by General Musharraf offer salutary lessons for Afghanistan. The main lesson is that technically attractive schemes, implemented without broad political backing, may not survive a change of government, a lesson which is pertinent given that Afghanistan faces its own process of "political transition".

Pakistan's Musharraf era "Devolution Plan" was pioneered by the National Reconstruction Bureau. The plan received significant international support, on the basis that it delivered functional institutions and addressed a real democratic deficit. However, the process received rather less support from the national level political class, which combined to undo much of the reform. The first watering down of the reforms came in 2004 when Musharraf, as part of the process of building support for his own position, found himself obliged to accommodate traditional political power-brokers. These national politicians were accustomed to exerting political influence over the police and the district administrations, practices which the reforms had aimed to limit. The arrival of a new elected government and the departure of Musharraf as president led to the centrepiece of the reforms, the local government structures, being allowed to lapse. Where as Musharraf had developed the lowest tiers of government, the elected government concentrated on the higher level components of the federation and decentralised powers from the federal government to the provinces.

The main lesson of this experience is that an effective political strategy to maintain support for decentralisation is more critical to its success than the elegance of the institutional schemes devised by the governance experts.

10. Interests of the Regional Powers

The cultural and economic influence of Afghanistan's neighbours is visible in the country's regions. Indeed, one of the defining features of the natural regions of Afghanistan is the respective neighbour to which each of them is connected. In areas along the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier, Pakistani currency is customarily used for transactions; trade and labour migration links span the border; and a significant part of the population routinely accesses services, such as health care and education, located in Pakistan. Equivalent links in the west of the country are with Iran. In the north, although there has been less mass migration, there are strong cultural links with Tajik, Uzbek and Turkman populations in the Central Asian states. These links are deeper than simply "zones of influence", where the neighbours project themselves into Afghanistan. Influence runs the other way also. The Afghan populations in the east, south, west

and north of the country have over time established zones of influence for themselves beyond Afghanistan's borders and exploit economic and cultural opportunities in the areas where they have settled and with which they trade. The relationships with the regional powers have affected the local elites' choice of "second home" and their external patronage relationships. There is a propensity for elites along the Pakistan border to maintain residences in Pakistan and to be cultivated by the Pakistan authorities. Elites in the west enjoy an equivalent relationship with Iran and those in the north with the Central Asian states. These informal zones of influence and the continuing interest of the regional powers in political outcomes in Afghanistan introduce a regional dimension into the Afghan debate over decentralisation.

In considering whether the regional powers should be regarded as stakeholders in any moves towards Afghan decentralisation, it is important to recognise the way in which any such move would run directly counter to traditions of Afghan nationalism. One recurrent theme in Afghan nationalist discourse involves xenophobia and acute sensitivity over alleged infringements on sovereignty by external powers. Any attempt to gain official recognition of neighbours' zones of influence would trigger this sensitivity in a way that informal or covert links with the neighbours apparently do not.

The pattern of support to the warring factions in the latter stages of the pre-2001 conflict provides a stark example of what amounted to competitive zones of influence. A syndicate of Iran, India and Russia, working through Tajikistan, aided the Northern Alliance in its northern enclave, while Pakistan aided the Taliban, first in the south and then nationally. Indeed, it has been suggested (controversially) that the one of the Taliban's mistakes was to overreach themselves by straying beyond Pakistan's natural zone of influence and launching their campaigns in the north of the country. The Taliban only encountered serious opposition to their rule once they expanded beyond Kabul and entered non-Pashtun areas where Pakistan-based networks had far less influence than in the southern and eastern border provinces. The Taliban's severest reverse pre-2001, the massacre in Mazar in 1997, was a classic example of the price of this overreach, as the deal which had brought the Taliban into Mazar fell apart when challenged by a group beyond their influence. Meanwhile, in the post 2001 period, an example of the new approach to regional power influence is the Iranian success in concentrating assistance and economic links on Herat and the western region along its border.

One of the ideas for stabilising Afghanistan as western forces withdraw has been to restore and formalise these zones of influence, essentially allowing Pakistan and other concerned powers to take responsibility for the areas adjoining their borders. According to this scheme, if the neighbours were reassured that their clients would be appointed as provincial governors or security chiefs in the border provinces, this would offer the neighbours a powerful guarantee offsetting any supposed threat to their own security. In Pakistan's case it is assumed that it would use this influence to offset Indian influence being projected towards FATA and to prevent the use of Kandahar or Nimroz for support of the Baloch insurgency. Iran or the Central Asian states could use their influence for checking the rise of the Taliban or any other Sunni fundamentalist group or drug cartel which might threaten their security.

Proposals by Afghan actors for decentralisation have little in common with the zone of influence scheme and are not intended to facilitate such a scheme. Indeed there are several reasons why any plans for formalising zones of influence as part of a grand strategy for Afghan stabilisation are impractical.

Local elites in all of Afghanistan's regions have a strong sense of being part of Afghan national politics. Formalising a role for neighbouring powers in administering Afghanistan would run directly counter to the tradition of Afghan nationalism and protection of sovereignty. Any political leader from one of Afghanistan's regions endorsing such a scheme would face such a backlash that he would probably forfeit his ability to engage in national politics. Therefore building political support within Afghanistan for the scheme would be impossible. Furthermore, any such scheme would run directly counter to one of the main thrusts of political reform in Afghanistan, which is towards democratisation and rendering public institutions and representatives accountable to the populations they serve. Afghan proponents of decentralisation have used the democratic case - that those charged with administering the provinces should answer to the people of those provinces. This spirit of democratic reform is incompatible with any notion of installing regional proxies to run the border provinces. Instead, the regional powers can be expected to continue a strategy of extending informal influence, along the lines of the Iranian practice in Herat and the west. As long as decentralisation takes place within the context of the unitary state, they can expect to have to underpin this by engaging with both the provincial and national authorities and without ever securing a formal zone of influence.

11. Conclusions & Recommendations

There is a compelling logic to the idea that decentralisation could contribute to stabilisation of Afghanistan.

It is an approach that has been used to good effect in other multi-ethnic societies. Afghanistan has well-defined provinces and natural regions which could, in principle, be used as the building blocks of a national scheme to accommodate the conflicting interest groups within decentralised structures, accountable to their local populations and even to ease the way to incorporating previously alienated groups into the political system. However, the mainstream Afghan debate on decentralisation includes only unambitious schemes for devolution of limited powers to sub-national administrative units. This debate stops well short of full federalist proposals, which are occasionally mentioned in the international literature divorced from any sense of what is politically possible in Afghanistan.

One of the reasons that the decentralisation agenda has been so limited in Afghanistan is that principles of centralism and the unitary state have been cornerstones of the country's constitutional history. Furthermore, in the realm of political rhetoric there is a long tradition of equating questioning of the unitary state to treason. However, underlying the sacrosanct status of centralisation and the unitary state is a complex set of political issues, including the practice of patronage, ethnic relations, access to natural resources and challenges of pluralism. Despite the sensitivities around decentralisation, the

government body charged with supervising local bodies has developed schemes for expanding roles of the different tiers of council. The main constitutional opposition has articulated a minimalist demand for key local officials to be elected. It thus focuses on democratising within existing sub-national boundaries, holding back from any proposal to revert to Afghanistan's historical provinces, which are larger and potentially more viable administrative units. The issue of Afghan decentralisation is relevant to the regional powers, because Pakistan, Iran and the Central Asian states all interact most intensively with adjoining parts of Afghanistan and the politics of these areas would be affected by any move towards decentralisation. However, just as there are political limits to what is possible in terms of viable decentralisation schemes, there would be likely to be significant resistance to any attempt to formalise relations between the regional powers and sub-national divisions.

Any proposal to decentralise power in Afghanistan, beyond the technocratic adjustments of roles and responsibilities contemplated by IDLG, would run against the grain of nearly a century of constitutional practice and the well-established political traditions of the largest ethnic group, the Pashtuns, who have historically favoured centralisation over decentralisation. International backing for any such scheme would be likely to render the opposition to it even more virulent. Therefore the international community should direct its efforts to helping Afghans reach a consensus on approaches to decentralisation rather than explicitly promoting any one of the schemes available.

As a reminder of the potential consequences of failing to build consensus, there is also a possibility of some form of decentralisation emerging as a default outcome in an acute crisis, rather than as a way of avoiding such a crisis. One such scenario would be if central government found itself in an impasse with local power-brokers and public sentiment in parts of the country. The central government could find itself unable to post its administrators in the provinces and districts, or find those administrators unable to function. The result of regions, whether north or south, withdrawing their consent from Kabul, would be a return to the days of *de facto* local powers, lacking constitutional sanction. This would be the least favourable decentralised outcome, marking the failure of efforts to restore constitutional government.

Afterword: Decentralisation & the Outcome of Political and Security Transitions

Afghanistan's political and security transitions in 2014, with the winding down of the ISAF mission and the installing of the National Unity Government, saw continuity in the organisation of administrative structures. The new government retained the well-established approach to centralisation of power. The position of provincial governor remained a key political appointment, signed off on by the President. One of the characteristics of the National Unity Government, which soon became apparent, was that the two teams forming the government engaged in intense politicking over all significant government appointments. The gubernatorial appointments and those to other provincial positions such as a police chief, were subsumed in a broader national level process, which was widely understood within Afghanistan as amounting to dividing spoils of office.

Decentralisation in National Political Bargains

Despite the visible lack of movement towards implementing any of the schemes for decentralisation, the issue did feature on the national level political agenda at key points in the political process. Prior to the 2014 presidential election, the National Front (Jabha Milli) had functioned de facto as the principal political opposition. This grouping had included a scheme for decentralisation to provincial level in its political programme. There was a realignment of political alliances during the nomination process for the election, as each slate required three candidates (president and two vice presidents) and each slate in effect tried to construct a cross-ethnic alliance. The decisive move which established Ashraf Ghani's candidacy as viable was when he signed up General Dostam as first vice presidential candidate. Dostam had hitherto been a stalwart of the National Front. His team negotiated with Ghani a commitment to review administrative structures and the constitution, seek a consensus on a decentralisation scheme and move a constitutional amendment. Deliberately, the commitment was to a process rather than to a specific outcome, because the two teams understood that a prior commitment to devolving power from the centre could be a liability in Pashtun constituencies on which they depended for Ghani's personal vote.

The more famous political deal which came to symbolise the Afghan transition process was the deal between Ashraf Ghani and Dr. Abdullah, brokered by John Kerry in September 2014. This deal, to establish a National Unity Government (NUG) was focused on power at the centre, with no reference to centre-periphery relations. It provided for Dr. Abdullah to acknowledge Dr. Ghani as President in return for taking up a prime minister-like position as Chief Executive, and thus bringing his team into

the government. One outcome of this series of alliances was that the entire leadership of the now defunct National Front, ended up in senior positions in the NUG.

The NUG faced significant criticism in its first year and a half of operation for the agonisingly slow decision-making, especially around appointments. Although there were many factors at play, one of them was a key issue of political culture, which parallels the sensitivities around decentralisation noted in the main paper. There has been a protracted debate on whether the NUG deal was inherently a “power-sharing” agreement, with one side arguing that inclusion in a multi-ethnic polity requires power-sharing and the other side arguing that the viability of the state depends upon having an empowered president and that power-sharing is thus contrary to the character of the state.

In the event, despite the presence of so many erstwhile champions of decentralisation in the NUG, and the original agreement to seek a consensus on a specific scheme, the NUG made no progress towards decentralisation in its first year and a half. Both the Ghani-Dostam deal and the NUG deal had anticipated convening a tribal assembly empowered to amend the constitution. However, during the opening months of 2016 demands for such a Loya Jirga were taken up by supporters of the former president, who seemed more interested in bringing down the government than in amending the constitution. The slowness of the NUG to address the decentralisation agenda did not signify simply that its proponents had been co-opted into centralised power. Rather, the NUG was obliged to prioritise the pragmatic concerns of holding its administration together in the face of an escalating insurgency and the Karzai-linked attempts at destabilisation. An embattled administration stuck with the status quo in terms of administrative structures and put decentralisation on the back burner.

Decentralisation & Informal Power

While the old centralised formal structures of government received a new lease of life during 2015 and 2016, other informal developments during Afghanistan's transitions highlighted the particularities of the country's regions. Kabul remained the seat of formal power and focus for national politics. But there were significant differences in the way that security, politics and economics played out in the country's regions and provinces, suggesting a degree of informal decentralisation. The first evidence of political diversity came in the presidential elections. Voting patterns were not uniform across the country but rather differed between provinces and regions, largely reflecting underlying ethnic geography. Provisional results of the second round of the presidential elections indicated that from Afghanistan's thirty-four provinces, eighteen supported Ashraf Ghani and sixteen supported Dr. Abdullah. In twenty-four of the provinces, the margin of victory was more than thirty per cent,

indicating a rather low level of integration of national politics. Similarly, differences in the patterns of insurgent violence were apparent across the provinces and regions. Interestingly the Taliban regionalised their approach to the insurgency, by dividing all their structures between two main zones – one zone consisting of provinces which were served from Quetta and the other zone of provinces served from Peshawar. The illegal economy introduced an element of decentralisation, as the state seemed increasingly unable or unwilling to assert its monopoly over natural resources. Much of the lapis lazuli trade in Badakhshan ended up controlled by a local militiaman and the Taliban, while control over opium revenues depended on control of territory and smuggling routes in Helmand and Kandahar and control of marble revenues depended on control of territory and routes in Herat and Helmand. While the political rhetoric of Kabul elites has continued to idealise the centralised, unitary state, the realities of an entrenched insurgency and power-brokers immersed in the illegal economy have driven a de facto decentralisation, ensuring that much economic activity happens beyond the writ of the state.

Prospects

In terms of the prospects for formal decentralisation, the experience of 2014-2016 can be summed up as “plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose”. In the short term, the ability of the national government to show sensitivity to the varying conditions and concerns of its provinces is probably more important than its ability to achieve progress on grand reform schemes. The main obstacle to progress towards formal decentralisation is the difficulty of fashioning a political strategy to build consensus. However the impasse on reform and decentralisation raises the prospect that movement will only be achieved as the unplanned outcome of a crisis, perhaps precipitated by insurgency gains.

Michael Semple
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