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SYSTEMS OF PATRONAGE: A PATH TO
CORRUPTION OR A SOURCE OF
ACCOUNTABILITY?

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SYSTEMS OF PATRONAGE: A PATH TO CORRUPTION OR A SOURCE OF ACCOUNTABILITY?

Abstract

In Afghanistan, a complex election process shapes a tangled power and patronage network, from the heart of the tribe to the State presidency. In those circumstances, blind obedience and favoritism are logic consequences of the leaders necessity to consolidate their own power.

Keywords:

Afghanistan, Sub-National Governance Policy, Yahya Khel .

The process of becoming a District Governor in Afghanistan is not exactly clear cut. The Independent Directorate for Local Governance (IDLG) is a government agency headed by a presidential appointee and has the ultimate approving authority for District Governors. Despite a Sub-National Governance Policy that came out in 2009, how exactly this happens is not entirely decided or certainly not evenly enforced. Nominees for the positions come from an open competition and have to meet the minimum education requirement of a 12th grade education. If they have not graduated, they potential candidates are given a test, set at the leisure of the IDLG, to ensure they are qualified. In theory, while Provincial Governors, themselves political appointees, have no official input, in fact, they do have some influence as to which candidates will be put forward and where they will be assigned once confirmed.

As opposed to a system of elected local officials, having a string of executive offices that are entirely appointed (where other appointees do the appointing) indicates a system that lacks

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popular accountability. This, on paper, is made up for by Provincial and District Councils, which are locally elected and have a certain degree of power over appointed officials. For example, the Sub-National Governance Policy states that the “District Council can hold the District Governor responsible for non-performance,”¹ but is less clear on exactly what constitutes non-performance or what the outcomes of such a decision would be.

Additionally, the entire system of appointed officials who are not responsible to an elected council reflects a political ideology where local executive officials are not representatives of the population, as they are in many Western democratic institutions, but are representatives of the Government of Afghanistan to the population. As such, their role is somewhat different than what a Western audience might envision. District Governors are more accountable to the Provincial Governors than the population. Accountability via the District Councils is largely moot at the time of writing, as they do not yet exist, and though there are Provincial Councils, most interviewees from the general population have no idea what they do.

The danger, of course, of such a series of appointees is that it creates a system where patronage can easily become endemic. Governors have sway over who becomes a District Governor, as do the Afghan President and members of the IDLG, making cronyism and nepotism a serious concern. The education requirements allows individuals up and down the appointing chain to stall or block certain candidates, remove incumbents, or generally just make the job unpleasant for those in office. (For example, a former District Governor in Khost Province had been in office for six months, but was never officially appointed because the IDLG was stalling on offering him his education equivalency exam. As such, he never got paid had his authority undermined because he was not official.) And the current, government-sponsored alternatives to District Councils only exacerbate the problem. In some areas, Afghanistan Social Outreach Program is using USAID² money to create semi-official *shuras* (councils of elders) to advise and assist the District Governors as a temporary fix until actual Councils can be elected.³ While the pool of 200 or so candidates are usually locally selected in villages, the District Governors and Governors ultimately decide who the final 25-35 members will be, thereby potentially extended the lines of cronyism even further. Since these ASOP *shuras* are responsible for drawing up prioritized lists of development projects, these members (and whomever’s interests they represent) have a great deal of say as to where money in the district goes and potentially granting the District Governor an even greater degree of influence.

MINIMIZING CORRUPTION

There are several measures to alleviate potential abuse at the local level. Though it is not necessarily official procedure, District Governors rarely stay in one place for long. The reasons are kept internal to Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, but often are said to include sending experienced District Governors to improve problem districts,

¹ “Sub-National Governance Policy.” *Islamic Republic of Afghanistan*. Summer 2009.

² Note of publisher: USAID, United States Agency for International Development.

³ See *Fact Sheet: Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP)*. USAID. June 2011.

political advancement for District Governors, or changes in upper echelon politics that leave new Governors and IDLG members attempting to fill positions with those loyal to them. Though it may or may not be an intended consequence, a regular turnover of District Governors ensures that no one man is in an area long enough to develop entrenched systems of favourites or extortion unless he already has them. In other words, it reduces the cementing of any particular patronage networks. Of course, it also means that local villages rarely have the time to develop the kinds of personal relationships with the District Governors that are the backbone of trust and support in Afghan culture.

Another way to reduce the possibility of a District Governor playing favourites is to select one who is not local to the area. Someone who is from another district and has no family in the one he works in is a lot less likely to be unfairly biased in favour of one village over the rest, so money is more likely to be distributed evenly. Similarly, he will have no vested interest when it comes to resolving issues like land disputes or other such court cases that often fall to the District Governor.

WHAT IS CORRUPTION?

The problem is that while a Western audience is quick to condemn cronyism and nepotism as corrupt practices, Afghans do not necessarily feel the same way. Patronage networks, instead, are an accepted and expected form of political engagement.⁴ When I asked interviewees what the Members of Parliament do for them, for instance, they often say the only thing they are good for is helping other people who go to Kabul get jobs. Perhaps most tellingly, when I asked people who complained about favouritism if they thought someone from their own village would do any differently, they laughed and said no. "I would definitely take care of my village first," one man told me with a smile that was both proud and guilty. To maintain local respect and support, elders and those who rise to power must demonstrate their ability and willingness to provide for the rest of their family and neighbours, or risk chastisement and public ridicule.⁵

Patronage networks, therefore, while creating a space for abuse via partiality, also provide for a measure of accountability. Those with power are obligated to take care of people. In a system of appointed officials who have no direct accountability to the population and do not have to worry about being removed through an election process, having someone who is firmly tied into local social networks makes them accountable to the population in ways that an outsider is not. Plus you can be reasonably sure that someone who is local is actually invested in improving the district, rather than just using his position as a political stepladder to bigger and better things.

⁴ See Al-Homayan, R. *A Study of Corruption: Nepotism and Employment in the Banking Sector in the State of Kuwait*. MBA Thesis, Masstricht School of Management, Netherlands, 2006; Loewe, M. et al. *The Impact of Favouritism on the Business Climate: A Study on Wasta in Jordan*. Bonn: German Development Institute. 2007; Cunningham, R. and Y. Sarayrah. *Wasta: The Hidden Force in Middle Eastern Society*. Westport: Praeger. 1993.

⁵ E.g.: Giustozzi, A. and N. Ullah. *"Tribes" and Warlords in Southern Afghanistan, 1980-2005*. London: Crisis States Research Centre. 2006; Schetter, C., R. Glassner and M. Karokhail. *Beyond Warlordism: The Local Security Architecture in Afghanistan*. Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft. 2/2007.

Katheleen Reedy

Leaders who are not local to an area do not necessarily have this natural pressure to be accountable or invested. As numerous interviewees said, “The District Governor isn’t from here—we don’t know where he comes from and he doesn’t have to help us.” Conversely, others have said of District Governors from the same district that, “He’s one of us, so of course he’ll help us.”

Unsurprisingly, however, international and local observers admit that even when local District Governors are invested and devoted to helping the population, there are greater or lesser degrees of favouritism. While this is largely an acceptable cultural practice, people may still resent it, especially when it is extreme. Though many people admit that they would be equally likely to do the same themselves, they still feel short-changed if they are left entirely out of the loop.

STORIES OF FAILURE

Yahya Khel

District Governor Muhammed Khatawazai was not from the district of Yahya Khel, Paktika. He was from a district further south, from the same village as the previous Governor of Paktika, under whom he was appointed and with whom he shared a last name. No one knew the exact nature of the relationship between the District Governor and the former Governor, but it seemed likely his appointment had been an example of cronyism. While he would go out into the bazaar surrounding the District Centre, he only did so when his Coalition Forces counterparts strongly urged him to do so and provided him an escort, nor would he go farther than that. There was a district shura that met occasionally, though not an ASOP one, and one meeting I attended, while intended to be focused on development quickly spun out of control and turned into accusations of various people being Taliban. It was fairly clear that the whole thing was a joke, to show that the District Governor had no authority. The District Governor did not regain control of his meeting, but nor did he really make an attempt as he knew he had no real support amongst the men of the shura.



1: Pharmacist in Yahya Khel who was too intimidated by INS to accept humanitarian aid intended for infants and pregnant women

Granted, his antipathy towards most of his district was widely shared. When I was there (summer 2010) Yahya Khel largely belonged to the insurgents. From the government’s side, there were schools and public clinics in the main village, but these were poorly stocked, poorly staffed and closed whenever the insurgents said to close them. Development projects were few and far between. There were regular attacks on the District Centre and most of the population were scared to be seen talking to any American or Afghan officials. When we walked through the streets of even the bazaar near the District Centre, people did not return smiles or hellos,

but glared at us. Kids did not even ask for pens, a sure sign of heavy intimidation, and when most people answered questions at all, they did so grudgingly.

Some, however, were willing to talk to a less-threatening civilian female who asked questions that focused on daily life and the local economy rather than security. As they opened up, they did not complain about intimidation from insurgents, but said the local politicians were the source of their problems. Talking to the District Governor was as effective as “writing their concerns on ice on a hot day.” They complained that he did not care and did not listen. He did not come out to speak to them, which one of the most important local measures of mutual respect and good governance. He did nothing to improve their lot in life, so they had no reason to support him or the government he represented. They felt that his appointment had been entirely political and he was only using it as a stepping stone to move to bigger and better things.

To make matters worse, he was an entirely unknown quantity. In the Pashtun areas of Afghanistan, as in much of the Middle East and South Asia, lineage and heritage are important factors in judging a person.⁶ To be from a respected family that people actually know gives a person an automatic advantage in life. Individuals may fail of their own accord in spite of their backgrounds, but it is harder to achieve prominence when coming from an inconsequential family. Knowing a person’s family and where they come from is a central part of how people view and interact with that person. Many people complained that they did not know anything about Khatawazai. They did not know where he was from and therefore they could not judge him. Nor would he ever truly fit in—he was an outsider.

When I asked if they had anywhere to voice their concerns about him or try and get him replaced, they just laughed. From their perspective there were neither official nor informal recourses to enforce any kind of accountability. As a result, the people of Yahya Khel tacitly offered their support to a political-judicial alternative—namely, the insurgency.

Mandozai

Mandozai is a district in Khost Province and is essentially a suburb of Khost City. As of spring 2011, it was relatively quiet and free from insurgent activity. Schools were regularly open, clinics were accessible and supplied, and there was a strong local police force that patrolled regularly. With few attacks and a strong development agenda pushed by a financially-savvy District Governor, on the surface, the district appeared to be doing well. The District



2: Mandozai District Governor Wali Shah and a shura...of his closest neighbors and family

⁶ Lindholm, C. “Kinship Structure and Political Authority: The Middle East and Central Asia,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 28: 1986; Mundy, M. *Domestic Government: Kinship, Community and Polity in North Yemen*. London: I.B. Tauris. 1995.

Governor's name was Wali Shah, and he was from a local village in the district.

Underneath the calm exterior, however, was a disgruntled population. Everyone knew the District Governor's name and that he was local. But rather than this making him accountable in a fairly populous district, it led to him playing favourites. There was a shura (though not an ASOP one for much of 2010-2011) and they met, but almost more as a formality and to look good for COALITION FORCES. Given the fact that the district managed to secure a lot of development money, we asked the District Governor how he knew what projects to prioritize if he did not have meetings with representatives from all the villages. He assured us that he went out to the villages regularly to see for himself what they need.

While not necessarily an acceptable substitute for relying on elders, the fact that he went out to the population was a potential indicator that he was invested in a program of good governance through outreach. When we visited villages, however, it quickly became apparent that he only visited those closest to his home. He did not see or assess the needs of the rest, and this biased approach left many behind when it came to divvying up funding. Those people left out were aware of this excessive favouritism and strongly resented it. They were beginning to get a sour taste for him and the government that appointed him: "He never does anything for anyone and lives to stuff his own pockets;" "I've never seen him and I can't say anything about him. The government obviously does nothing for our village." When I asked people if there was anything they could do about it, they were derisive, though some suggested sending representatives to the Provincial Governor. But rather than providing an official mechanism for accountability, the best they could do was hope that someone with more power would listen to them.

On the flip side, of course, people from the villages that the District Governor favoured thought he was great. They were supportive of him and quite comfortable approaching him if they had problems that they wanted him to resolve. They liked that he came to their villages and saw their problems firsthand. They liked that he was responsive. And if he ever slipped or failed to do so, they had a method of enforcing accountability—as his family, friends and village-mates, they could put pressure on him through shared kinship and neighbour networks.

If Wali Shah was less biased and other villages at least got some attention and money, the situation might have been more acceptable. It was the *excessive* favouritism that left so many behind that made him a failure from the population's perspective.

STORIES OF SUCCESS

Just as the failures of local governance were largely due to the ineffectiveness or degrees of corruption of the individual District Governors, the success stories are just as personality-dependent.

Shewak

Shewak District is high in the mountains of Paktiya Province. It is a small district, with only two major villages and a District Centre that sits between them. Its mountainous terrain

makes much of the district difficult to access and the road that runs along it (the Khost-Gardez Road) is the main pass between Pakistan, Khost and ultimately on to Kabul. COALITION FORCES convoys along this road are a prime target for attacks because they are frequent and it is easy for insurgents to hide in the mountains. Despite a less than stellar security situation, however, the District Governor was widely popular.

District Governor Ali Abad was from another district in Paktiya. As such, he had no vested interest in the community, but by luck of the draw, he was a man who was more invested in trying to improve Afghanistan than his own political career. And while he was not a known quantity (and therefore had no informal accountability), because he was not local, he was less prone to corruption remained unbiased towards either of the population centres. Under his supervision, an ASOP shura was created, with an equal balance of men from both villages, especially in positions of authority. The shura leader was from one, the deputy leader was from the other, and so on. Ali Abad made regular visits on his own to talk to the people all over the district and hear their problems. Everyone I interviewed said they felt welcome at the District Centre if they had a request for help. In fall 2010, he was leading the shura in making a list of development projects that were fairly balanced across the district. People highly respected him because he did not play favourites. But it was luck and only luck that the district got a Governor who cared about his job.

Things were not perfect in the district, though. As mentioned, the security was difficult to maintain and success can sometimes have a price. In an effort to demonstrate their power and undermine the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's successes, insurgents targeted Abad. By being impartial and motivated, he was a glaring threat to the insurgent foothold in the mountains as he gave people active reason to support the government. They killed him with an IED on his way into work one morning in November 2010.

Khayr Kot (also known as Zargun Shah)

Abdul Mateen was the District Governor of Khayr Kot District in Paktika Province as of summer 2010. He was from the village of Sagenah, in the north of the district. While he technically did not meet the education requirement for a District Governor, the Governor was working to keep him in place because he was considered so successful. He had been appointed under the previous Governor, so it was not cronyism at work. Local COALITION FORCES also described him as being very effective. Unlike its neighbouring district Yahya Khel, the security situation was not bad in the area.



3: Shura in Khayr Kot--the number of attendees is a testament to their respect for the District Governor

There was a new public clinic under construction in the District Centre, which was also home to a good-sized bazaar. Schools were open and well-attended. In the two weeks I spent there, I went out several times to inspect the numerous development projects the District Governor had helped to initiate.

Talking to villagers, there was no denying that Sagenah was faring better than most of the other villages in the district when it came to getting projects, but unlike in Mandozai, Mateen did not focus on his home village to the exclusion of others. He held regular shuras with all elders and travelled to engage people across the district. He was open and accessible to any who wanted to speak with him and was even happy to address judicial cases that people brought to him while he was at home. In other words, people knew where he lived. They knew his family, his lineage—he was a known quantity and already had a place in their social networks. He was one of them and accountable to them for his performance and actions.

CONCLUSION

There are a lot of different dynamics at work that determine the success or failure of local officials. In a system that lacks formal methods to enforce accountability (through elections, for example), patronage-style networks become the predominant mode of interaction between the population and the government (where there is any interaction at all). This creates a delicate balance between informal methods of accountability and the potential for abuse and excessive favouritism. And that is before we take into account political machinations at higher echelons. There are advantages and disadvantages to having a leader come from the local area.

Despite the potential for excessive favouritism, however, there appears to be greater success with someone who is local. While it could turn into a Mandozai situation where parts of the population are left behind, the informal accountability networks and the very fact that the District Governor is invested in improving the area outweigh these potential negatives. Playing favourites is expected and as long as the entire community can benefit somewhat, accepting small amounts of what we would consider to be corruption seems to be the lesser of the available evils. In the case of Shewak and all successful District Governors who are outsiders, it is only by luck that the people get a strong, engaged and responsible leader. Even in Mandozai, Wali Shah was at least popular in some areas and he was very motivated in improving parts of the district. In Yahya Khel, by contrast, no one approved of Khatawazai and he was not willing to risk himself by reaching out and doing anything for people who were not his own. Mateen in Khayr Kot, though not perfect, seemed to be an example of the best case scenario—someone who was accountable to the people he served while minimizing the degree of corruption.

Local or not, invested or not, biased or not, for many people, whether their District Governor is decent and works to meet their needs is entirely luck of the draw. If the people of a district are not happy with their leadership, they really have no recourse to change it. They can appeal to the Governor, but unless they know him, chances are they will have any ability to influence his or the IDLG's decisions as to who is appointed. Until the District Councils are

Katheleen Reedy

formed and the relationship between them and the District Governors are made clear, the balance between accountability and corruption—and with it the very face of Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan on the most everyday level—will be left entirely to chance.ⁱ

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⁷ **NOTA:** Las ideas contenidas en los *Documentos de Opinión* son de responsabilidad de sus autores, sin que reflejen, necesariamente, el pensamiento del IEEE o del Ministerio de Defensa.