

When Aid Replaces Ideology: Corruption as a Hegemonic Device in Post-Taliban Afghanistan

Research Thesis

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Abstract

For the last two decades, Afghanistan has consistently been listed among the world's most corrupt nations in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. While many efforts have been made to discover how corruption might be reduced, the more foundational question of *why* corruption is so persistent has been pursued far less thoroughly. This discourse has been dominated by two generalized views of corruption: the first of these views hold that corruption is the result of immutable cultural inferiorities; the second view holds that corruption is the result of bad actors who, through their avarice, disrupt an otherwise impartial government. I transcend these reductionist views by placing Afghan corruption within its proper historical and politico-economic context. I argue that corruption is a hegemonic device that has been increasingly necessitated by the contradictions the U.S. invasion has thrust upon the nationally-unifying ideology of the past. I then analyze the nature of political corruption and administrative corruption from within that framework.

Introduction

Afghan history is often chronicled as successive periods of revolt and wartime punctuated by brief spells of peace. While the nation has been of great geostrategic significance for centuries, serving as a centerpiece in the Great Game and a major battleground for Great Britain, czarist Russia, the Soviet Union, and the United States, what is notable is the great historical ignorance with which each invading country entered Afghanistan. For instance, U.S. General Stanley McChrystal gave the following explanation of American failures after his tenure in the country:

There was a rich history in Afghanistan—in which the United States had been deeply involved—and yet we didn't really go to school on that. Not only did we not understand the culture of Afghanistan, but we did not really understand the players in Afghanistan.¹

This observation is instructive not only when considering the objectives of warfare, but also for understanding the causes of corruption. Contemporary observers attempting to explain the prevalence of Afghan corruption have relied upon simplistic explanations that are contingent upon the prevalence of bad actors or vague references to Afghan culture that obscure the importance of political economy. This study will examine the historical role of corruption as a hegemonic device that contributed to holding together Afghanistan's fractious nation. It will then examine how the U.S. invasion reoriented Afghanistan's political landscape by diminishing the political utility of Afghanistan's ideological hegemonic devices and how that preceded the spike in corruption that has occurred since Hamid Karzai came to power.

To provide a historically-substantiated account of Afghan corruption, this paper will be structured as follows. Chapter 1 will provide a brief outline of the history of Afghan resistance to centralized government and how it manifested a need for a hegemonic state founded upon a uniting ideology, coercion, and patrimonial exchanges. Chapter 2 will explore the present

¹ McChrystal, and Miklaucic, "An Interview with General (Ret.) Stanley McChrystal."

political economy of corruption, challenging the common views of why corruption exists, and highlight how the undermining of ideological hegemonic devices after the U.S. invasion fostered a reliance upon corruption for the sake of stability. Chapter 3 examines how political corruption unites elites behind the national government and transcends the nation's traditional ethnic divides. Chapter 4 examines how administrative corruption is a consequence of political corruption and is driven by the national government's decision to empower stability-producing strongmen. As a whole, this approach to understanding corruption aims to explain why it is so persistent in Afghanistan; this understanding will also shine a much-needed light on how to reduce it.

Chapter 1: The Historical Imperative to Build Hegemony

Afghanistan is often referred to as the “graveyard of empires.” While this distinction proudly boasts the nation's resistance to foreign colonization, it fails to betray the deep influence that surrounding foreigners have had on the nation's composition. In the North, Uzbeks forced South by the Oxus empire, the Soviet Union, and later the government of Uzbekistan, dominate the regional center of Mazar-i-Sharif. Through the Panjshir valleys and in Kabul, Tajiks maintain an ethnic base larger than in their nominal country of Tajikistan.² In the mountains of Hazarajat, live the Shiite Hazara people, believed to be descendants of Genghis Khan's invading army that arrived in the thirteenth century.³ Across the South, Pashtuns who once freely navigated the Durand Line live in dispersed tribal arrangements. The Afghan constitution recognizes 14 ethnic groups: Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Baloch, Turkmen, Nuristani, Pamiri, Arab, Gujar, Brahui, Qizilbash, Aimaq, and Pasha.⁴ Although it is clear Pashtuns constitute at least a plurality

² Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, “Tajik.”

³ Hucal, “Afghanistan: Who Are the Hazaras.”

⁴ *The World Factbook*, “Afghanistan.”

of the population, determining the precise ethnic composition of the country has always been controversial.⁵ Yet even the Pashtun plurality is fragile as they are subdivided into Durrani, Ghilzais, and Gurghusht and further subdivided into hundreds of distinct clans.⁶ The extent of ethnic and tribal antagonisms across the country is succinctly revealed by the often-quoted Pashtun proverb: “I against my brothers; my brothers and I against my cousins; my brother, my cousins, and I against the rest of the world.”⁷ These tensions have historically been further exacerbated by foreign powers who support varying ethnic and tribal factions within Afghanistan to further their national interests.

This diversity has traditionally made Afghanistan’s overwhelmingly rural population difficult to govern at a national level. Through the first century of Ahmed Shah Durrani’s empire, the central government exerted little influence outside of Kabul and allowed the nation’s tribes and local communities to govern themselves as they saw fit. As American journalist Rajiv Chandrasekaran explains:

Afghans exhibited the same sort of rugged self-sufficiency that had characterized early American settlers on the western plains. Their lives were contained in villages. They married their cousins and spent their lives tending fields and herding goats. They sought little from the state, which had little to offer. In return, they wanted to be left alone.⁸

Even the term ‘Afghan’ conceals a resistance to centralization and ethnic tension. Contemporary Tajik leaders have objected to the inclusion of the term on government identification cards, as it was once understood to refer only to Pashtuns.⁹

With these longstanding divisions, creating a dominant state, one that Antonio Gramsci defined as “hegemony protected by the armor of coercion,” has proven historically difficult.¹⁰ All

⁵ Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 23.

⁶ Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 25.

⁷ Wahab, *In My Father's Country*, 323.

⁸ Chandrasekaran, *Little America*, 19.

⁹ Shalizi, “Who is an Afghan?”

¹⁰ Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, 263.

modern Afghan leaders have employed a careful combination of coercion and hegemonic devices to maintain and centralize their power. These hegemonic devices aim to win the consent of those who are ruled over through non-coercive means like the construction of a nationally recognized ideology.¹¹ Afghan leaders often appeal to historical narratives to win this consent, highlighting the state's role in defending Islam, the legacy of the royal lineage, the necessity of repelling foreign invaders, and the legitimizing power of jirgas (councils). Undergirding these ideological devices is the distribution of rewards to potential (often ethnic) opposition. A vast network of patrimonial exchanges, whereby the head of state redistributes his resources and power to pliable tribal leaders, has always been necessary, as the national ideology alone was never sufficient to win the consent of Afghanistan's many tribes. Even at the local level, tribal khans redistribute the resources they acquire from the state or market to legitimize their powerful position in the community lest they be accused of holding unjustified authority.¹² Anthropologist Whitney Azoy has referred to the historical presence of these exchanges among leaders as a "culturally tolerated deviance." She contrasts that state of affairs with the excessive post-2001 levels of these exchanges that, under the new form of governance created by the Bonn Agreement, are now understood as corruption.¹³ The purpose of this increase in corruption since the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan becomes much more evident once the historical context in which it arose is presented.

Throughout the 19th century, Afghanistan's rulers remained weak and only succeeded in mobilizing large amounts of manpower and resources when they were holding back British occupiers or opposing their foreign-backed, and therefore viewed as un-Islamic, leaders like the

¹¹ This interpretation of Gramsci's concept of hegemony is borrowed from Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*, 112

¹² Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 42.

¹³ Wissing, *Funding the Enemy*, 136.

notorious Shah Shuja.¹⁴ The first ruler to challenge the rural countryside's dominance was Amir Abdul Rehman Khan (1880-1901), Afghanistan's Iron Emir. However, he carefully limited the scope of his reforms largely to issues of taxation and security.¹⁵ Nonetheless, these narrow reforms were met with resistance; only after crushing dozens of rebellions, most notably in Bamiyan and Kafiristan, painting the state as the defender of Islam and Pashtuns, and bribing numerous tribal leaders was Abdul Rehman able to construct a skeleton of a national administrative system.¹⁶ American scholar Louis Dupree characterized Rehman's policies as a case of "internal imperialism," highlighting just how intrusive the reforms appeared to the formerly autonomous regions across the country.¹⁷ For the one-hundred years following Abdul Rehman's rule, Afghanistan's leaders consistently struggled to maintain the quasi-centralized state Rehman built. Instead of humbling themselves in the face of persistent opposition, these leaders fought to expand the scope of governmental authority, albeit with little success. The result was consistent instability and infighting among the narrow band of Pashtun elites who fought to control the nation. Consequently, every leader since Abdul Rehman, up until Hamid Karzai left office in 2014, has been forcefully removed from office.

Abdul Rehman's grandson, Amanullah, attempted to build upon his grandfather's powerful legacy. He attempted to consolidate state control using many of the previously discussed hegemonic devices. Upon taking the throne, he railed against British influence, launched the Third Anglo-Afghan War, and called upon tribes along the southern border to wage jihad against the British. After winning independence, Amanullah pursued an array of ambitious reforms, tackling issues from education to child marriage to the treatment of women. As the

¹⁴ Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 121-123.

¹⁵ Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 173.

¹⁶ Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 155.

¹⁷ Dupree, *Afghanistan. 2nd ed.*, xix.

peripheries outside of Kabul became increasingly fed up with these intrusions, Amanullah held a Loya jirga (grand council) to legitimize his authority. Instead, the jirga's delegates rejected his modernist outlook and the country devolved into civil war.¹⁸

The next trial of centralization would proceed a half-century later as a flurry of Soviet-supported Marxist leaders attempted to radically transform Afghanistan. The first of these leaders, Muhammad Daoud, set out to transform all aspects of the country: security, taxation, the treatment of women, land ownership, the local economy, and the role of the religious establishment. He intended to destroy the decentralized nature of Afghan society in order to implement his communist agenda.¹⁹ After Daoud was ousted from power, the Soviets invaded and installed numerous puppet leaders. Instead of appealing to Afghan society, these leaders rejected Afghan tradition in favor of a Marxist ideological vanguard—led by Soviets advisers and their Afghan proxy, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan²⁰—and relied on the sheer strength of the Soviet military occupation to maintain their rule. When asked about his popular support by Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin, President Nur Muhammad Taraki reported that “There is no active support [for the government] on the part of the population.”²¹ This strategy backfired as one of the earliest Soviet reforms, a compulsory literary campaign for women in 1979, resulted in large mutinies from the Afghan Army, including Ismael Khan's massive Afghan 17th Division.²² As the state became an enemy of its alleged constituency, many Afghans resisted as mujahideen (holy warriors), fighting the Soviet army with American weapons and aid

¹⁸ Barfield, *Afghanistan*, 185-188.

¹⁹ Friedman, *Terrorism, Afghanistan, and War*, 75.

²⁰ Despite their attempts at forming a vanguard, the PDPA contained serious internal divisions most notably between the Khalq (people) and Parcham (flag) factions which briefly split before being persuaded to reunify after pressure from the Soviet-led international communist movement. These divisions are discussed by Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, 122-145.

²¹ Gaddis, *The Cold War*, 210.

²² Yousaf, *Afghanistan--the Bear Trap*, 56-57.

funneled through Pakistan.²³ By the end of the Soviet occupation, over one million Afghans had been killed; the state structure had been decimated; regional commanders gained prominence across the country, and millions of Afghan refugees had fled across the nation's borders primarily into Pakistan and Iran.²⁴ The last Soviet-backed leader, Najibullah, struggled to hold power after the Soviets left Afghanistan. For the final years of his rule, his “national reconciliation” program distributed cash to local security forces and defecting commanders. Due to his affiliation with the Soviets, Najibullah had no claim to Afghanistan’s hegemonic narratives and had no choice but to rely upon simple patrimonial exchanges. As Soviet aid dried up, this redistribution strategy proved insufficient to hold power. Instead, it induced severe inflation and led to his departure a few years later.²⁵

Abandoned by their foreign benefactors after the Soviet defeat, the alliance between the seven Afghan mujahideen parties quickly fragmented. The Soviets' policy of murdering tribal elders across the country left the mujahideen commanders (warlords) to compete for dominance in the anarchic post-Najibullah environment.²⁶ These warlords, despised for their mercilessness and corruption, ruled over their territories with impunity. The most powerful figures included Abdul Rashid Dostum based in Mazar-i-Sharif; Ahmed Shah Massoud in Panjshir; Ismael Khan in Herat; and Burhanuddin Rabbani as the ostensible leader in Kabul. In the South, power was even further decentralized as no single Pashtun leader emerged to rule Kandahar and the surrounding provinces. Instead, in 1994, a new movement emerged. The Taliban (students), consisting of many veterans of the Soviet war and refugees that were educated in Pakistani madrassas (seminary schools), hoped to bring an end to the corruption and excesses of warlords

²³ Yousaf, *Afghanistan--the Bear Trap*, 77.

²⁴ Byman, *Deadly Connections*, 189-190.

²⁵ Rubin, *Afghanistan from Cold War Through the War on Terror*, 56.

²⁶ Gopal, *No Good Men*, 75.

by governing according to their Deobandi understanding of Islam.²⁷ By many accounts they succeeded, reducing the number of obtrusive checkpoints along roadways, providing security against warlords, and reducing overall crimes.²⁸ Regardless, the Taliban's authoritarian rule was their most distinguishing feature. Their leader, Mullah Omar, the self-proclaimed Amir-ul Momineen (Commander of the Faithful), sidelined local shuras and relied solely on the advice of the Kandahar Shura until even its opinion proved too difficult to accommodate.²⁹ Omar's totalitarian rule rivaled even the imperialism of the Soviets. His strict interpretation of Sharia law prohibited Western music, videos, dancing, playing cards, television, and education for women.³⁰ Across the nation, the Taliban's intolerance of Afghanistan's natural diversity was observable in the oppression of women in Herat and Kabul, the targeted killings of Shiite Hazaras in Mazar-i-Sharif, and the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas.

By 2001, the Taliban movement had taken control of over 90% of the country; the last holdout was Ahmed Shah Massoud's stronghold in the Panjshir valleys.³¹ Although the Taliban disregarded the importance of Afghanistan's traditions, of which they knew little, they were able to dominate the country by relying upon the support of Osama bin Laden and his Afghan Arabs, foreign volunteers, and most importantly, Pakistan. In essence, the Taliban had a greater affinity with its foreign sponsors than the nation it was trying to conquer. As Pakistan journalist Ahmed Rashid describes:

Many of them [Taliban] had been born in Pakistani refugee camps, educated in Pakistani madrassas, and had learnt their fighting skills from Mujaheddin parties based in Pakistan. As such the younger Taliban barely knew their own country or history, but from their madrassas they learnt about the ideal Islamic society created by the Prophet Mohammed 1,400 years ago and this is what they wanted to emulate.³²

²⁷ Esposito, *The Islamic Threat*, 264-265.

²⁸ Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*, xvi.

²⁹ Rashid, *Taliban*, 102.

³⁰ Rashid, *Taliban*, 2.

³¹ Maizland, and Laub, "The Taliban in Afghanistan."

³² Rashid, *Taliban*, 23.

Although in their inception this dynamic provided many Afghans hope that the Taliban could unite the country and transcend the nation's history of ethnic factionalism, these hopes were quickly dashed. The Taliban ruled by force and carefully distributed payments to tribal leaders that proved amenable, a tactic they likely gleaned from Afghanistan's previous rulers.³³

Although the U.S. relationship with the Taliban had been deteriorating since American diplomats and activist organizations called attention to the Taliban's treatment of women and Osama bin Laden's 1998 attacks on the United States' embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, only the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center would convince the United States to intervene in Afghan affairs. With a ground force of 2,500 troops and a massive air campaign, the United States, working in a coalition with the Northern Alliance of Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara commanders, was able to oust the Taliban from power by December 2001.³⁴ It then became the challenge of the United States and its coalition partners to pick up the pieces of war-torn Afghanistan while continuing to combat a Taliban resurgence.

Throughout modern Afghan history, certain trends persist. Ethnic and tribal factionalism has divided the country into semi-autonomous regions; only the nationally transcendent mandates to repel foreigners and protect the state's Islamic character have united the state's myriad factions around Pashtun rulers. Skepticism toward ambitious, centralizing leaders is also a constant among rural, particularly non-Pashtun, peoples. Leaders from Abdul Rehman to Mullah Omar reacted to this environment by fortifying their leadership with what Gramsci described as "hegemony protected by the armor of coercion." While coercion was the dominant strategy of the Soviet-backed leaders and Mullah Omar, leaders lacking outside military assistance could never hope to dominate the country by force and were forced to build

³³ Friedman, *Terrorism, Afghanistan, and War*, 197.

³⁴ *Military Times*, "A Timeline of U.S. Troop Levels."

hegemony. For example, Amanullah’s primary means of building hegemony was by cultivating historical narratives and a nascent nationalism. Leaders who could neither dominate through force nor build ideological hegemony were forced to rely on corruption, the tactic of leaders for whom “coercion is too dangerous and consent is too ineffectual.”³⁵ The most striking example of this phenomenon prior to the American invasion is under the presidency Najibullah, whose distribution of Soviet aid through his “national reconciliation” program was all that kept him in power after the Soviet withdrawal. The American-backed presidents —Karzai and Ghani— have been similarly reliant on corruption to build hegemony. As was the case with Najibullah, many observers worry a cessation of aid would lead to a collapse of the government.³⁶

It is this long history, or rather the American neglect of it, that has led to the blunders of American state-building efforts in Afghanistan. Corruption is now endemic to Afghan politics and has been one of the largest issues perturbing Afghans since the signing of the Bonn Agreement. As of 2019, approximately 68% of Afghans felt corruption was a major problem in their daily life.³⁷ Anti-corruption journalist Sarah Chayes has described it as a mechanism that is “manufacturing Taliban [support]” and a threatening “matter of national security.”³⁸ This threat is best understood not as a result of the greed of warlords and other bad actors, nor as a cultural deficiency among Afghans, but as a political attempt to maintain a hegemonic state in an exceptionally constrained political environment where neither coercion nor a common ideology is readily available. The “culturally tolerated deviance” of the past has been transformed into an intolerable, all-encompassing system of corruption due to the destruction of Afghanistan’s

³⁵ Chase-Dunn, “Hegemony and Social Change,” 366.

³⁶ Rubin, “An Ailing America.”

Barnett Rubin, a leading expert on Afghanistan, recently made the case for continuing aid to Afghanistan by citing the fall of Najibullah as a perilous reminder of what can happen when Afghan governments are abandoned by their foreign sponsors.

³⁷ Akseer, et. al., “A Survey of the Afghan People.”

³⁸ Chayes, *Thieves of State*, 6-7.

national ideological narratives and the massive amounts of American wealth introduced into Afghanistan's traditionally patrimonial style of governance.

Chapter 2: Corruption as a Hegemonic Device

Corruption is often described as a modern construct. The patrimonial dynasties of the past had no norms of good governance or external standards to which they could be held, thus, they could not be considered corrupt, perhaps with exception of being corrupted by a foreign influence.³⁹ As a result, our understanding of corruption must be contextual. When Amir Abdul Rehman distributed money to tribal leaders to keep them from revolting, this was in line with political norms and even seen as charitable compared to the alternative of crushing their revolt. However, when Hamid Karzai repeatedly distributed state assets to potential opponents, this was understood as corruption and drew the ire of Afghans and foreign backers. In other words, corruption occurs where there is a gap between expectations and reality. The failure of the Afghan government to meet the high expectations that accompanied Western state-building efforts have produced a political culture that is perceived as rife with corruption. Given this fluid understanding of corruption, how can we understand its causes in contemporary Afghanistan? Two common reductionist views have competed for dominance among those with a stake in Afghanistan's future. The first views corruption as a cultural deficiency among Afghans; the second, as the consequence of bad actors who refuse to relinquish their hold on power. While both of these views hold kernels of truth, they miss why corruption has been so abundant at all levels of government since the Karzai administration.

The cultural view of corruption pessimistically asserts that corruption is in some way endemic to Afghan culture. Consequently, actors hoping to improve the country's governance

³⁹ Fukuyama, "Corruption as a Political Phenomenon," 52.

should tolerate an inevitable level of corruption from their politicians. Proponents of this view recall the very history of patrimonial exchange that I have discussed in Chapter 1. Furthermore, they might recall the nation's history of *wasita* (connections) culture, highlighting the role of nepotism, middlemen, political marriages, and the exchange of favors for a ruler to maintain power.⁴⁰ U.S. General David Petraeus epitomized this view when he pronounced that corruption had been a part of Afghan culture for “however long this country has probably been in existence.”⁴¹ But this attitude fails to recognize historical changes in the scale of corruption and Afghans' varying responses to these changes. Afghans clearly reject the idea of corruption as a cultural constant. Petraeus's offhand comment drew considerable outrage and, since the beginning of his counterinsurgency strategy, over 90% of Afghans have viewed corruption as a problem in their country.⁴² While the cultural view of corruption may recognize an important, albeit limited, historical context, it is largely, as U.S. General H.R. McMaster concluded, “bigotry masquerading as cultural sensitivity.”⁴³ Corruption is far more than a quirk of Afghan culture; it is a universal political tool that's presence has been exacerbated by the unique circumstances of Afghan politics since the U.S. invasion.

The view of corruption emphasizing bad actors takes a different approach. It begins with the axiomatic and rather circular proposition that corruption is common because there are a lot of people participating in corruption.⁴⁴ Proponents of this view greatly resent the culture of *tufangsalari* (rule by the gun) that provides impunity for warlords and corrupt politicians.⁴⁵ Given

⁴⁰ Rubin, *Afghanistan from the Cold War Through the War on Terror*, 164-165.

⁴¹ Peter, “Petraeus Comments on Corruption.”

⁴² Akseer et. al., “A Survey of the Afghan People.”

⁴³ Partlow, *A Kingdom of Their Own*, 153.

⁴⁴ The term ‘bad actor’ is generally applied to those who act against the interest of the state for their own benefit. Oftentimes the terms ‘warlord,’ and ‘local strongman’ are employed to communicate the same thing within a more narrow context. However, what constitutes a bad actor is rarely objectively defined. The use of this rhetoric is critiqued by Giustozzi, “‘Good’ State vs. ‘Bad’ Warlords?”

⁴⁵ Rubin, *Afghanistan from the Cold War Through the War on Terror*, 127-128.

the immense power of the president in Afghan politics, those blaming bad actors for Afghanistan's ills are quick to highlight the shortcomings of President Karzai in addressing corruption within his government. Former U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan, Karl Eikenberry referred to Karzai as "not an adequate strategic partner."⁴⁶ Additionally, U.S. Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, consistently lobbied against Karzai during the 2009 presidential election, citing his incompetence, among other reasons.⁴⁷ In essence, this view understands corruption as an act of will, a free choice made by greedy opportunists and plunderers who dominate the country. But is it true that Hamid Karzai was willfully corrupt? His fierce protestations against corruption within his cabinet might be best understood as political theatre but his family has appeared genuinely frustrated with and willing to mock his ascetic ways and disinterest in money. As his cousin (which, conveniently, is the same word as 'enemy' in Pashto) Hashim confessed:

He doesn't want any of his relatives to get rich... He wants us to live in, what you call it, a soup kitchen? Or live in a shrine. Or an orphanage. Something like this. You tell him 'Oh, I saw your cousin, he's a big businessman in Dubai. He owns a hotel'. He'll be very upset. If you tell him, 'I met your cousin, he's living in a shrine, he's smoking tobacco and he doesn't have any money for his food,' he'll say, 'Oh, what a great guy!'⁴⁸

To those viewing corruption as an act of free will, these candid moments must be disregarded. To those who think this way, Karzai was a greatly-empowered president who, despite the ability to tackle corruption, allowed it to persist. Accordingly, an honest technocratic president who would promote transparency and accountability in good faith could solve Afghanistan's corruption problem. To many advocates of reform, former Finance Minister, and President, Ashraf Ghani best fit this role.⁴⁹ Yet, even he had felt it necessary to appoint notorious warlord

⁴⁶ Gall, *The Wrong Enemy*, 202.

⁴⁷ Coll, *Directorate S*, 379.

⁴⁸ Partlow, *A Kingdom of Their Own*, 165.

⁴⁹ Packer, "Afghanistan's Theorist-in-Chief."

Abdul Rashid Dostum as his running mate in his 2014 presidential campaign and as president has struggled to curb corruption.⁵⁰ Even the greatest advocates for reform must cooperate with bad actors or linger in obscurity. Realizing this folly, some have advocated increasing the capacity of the government so that politicians could draw legitimacy from their competency rather than from their associations with illegitimate actors such as warlords, criminals, etc.⁵¹ However, it has been noted that state legitimacy does not necessarily follow an increase in capacity absent other changes.⁵² Efforts to expand the scope of the Afghan state have only bred greater corruption and resentment. The unbridled faith in the well-meaning individual possessed by those who solely blame bad actors for Afghanistan's corruption has provided little insight, as no single major politician has been able to transcend Afghanistan's corrupted politics.

Despite the immense power the Afghan presidency carries, Karzai, like any politician, was bound by many constraints, especially given the vast power of informal and foreign actors in his country. When pressured by his foreign supporters to remove Sher Mohammed Akhundzai from the governorship of Helmand in 2005, Karzai relented but posed a poignant question: "Do you want a bad guy on your side or working for the Taliban?"⁵³ This question, while excusing corruption, elucidates a realpolitik that is essential to maintaining control over the country. The Taliban was far from Karzai's only constraint. Even more importantly, he was deprived of all of the past ideological narratives that served to legitimize the rule of his predecessors. Corruption in contemporary Afghanistan is best understood within this context. It is a hegemonic device that becomes dominant when the use of national ideological narratives and coercion becomes ineffective. It is not an act of complete free will nor cultural determinism. Acts of corruption in

⁵⁰ Rosenberg, "Technocrat to Afghan Populist."

⁵¹ This argument is expounded by Ghani, and Lockhart, *Fixing Failed States*, 115-166.

⁵² Fukuyama, *State-building*, 26.

⁵³ Chandrasekaran, *Little America*, 85.

Afghanistan are politico-economic, pragmatic decisions made within tight constraints to hold together a fragile, ethnically diverse, traditionally decentralized, and now foreign-backed state when the national ideology of the past has lost political utility.

The structure of Afghanistan's state, created in the Constitutional Loya Jirga of 2003, exhibited a belief that Afghanistan's historical constraints could be easily overcome. The Americans present at the jirga supported a strong central government that could stabilize the nation and prevent it from again becoming a base for terrorism but neglected the traditional sources of legitimacy in Afghan governance. While many Afghans, contrary to historical precedent, were willing to accept a strong centralized government if it resulted in peace, they have since soured on the idea due to its lack of results.⁵⁴ Lacking resources, authority, and his own army, Karzai relied on alliances of convenience with American-allied warlords, drug-dealers, and other local powerbrokers to maintain control over the country. His reliance on American security, even in his own palace, epitomizes the strict constraints on Karzai's decision making. Hamid Karzai was neither a cultural given nor a bad actor but a, relatively, rational political actor who relied upon corruption, which conferred upon him the approval of necessary powerbrokers, when all the ideological sources of hegemony were absent. These ideological sources of hegemony, narratives structured around repelling foreign invaders, protecting Islam, respecting royal lineage, and holding consensus-building jirgas, were inaccessible to Karzai, and the loss of all four of these narratives deserves examination.

The Karzai government's poverty and lack of an army or tax base forced it to be reliant upon rather than opposed to foreign intervention. Scholars have noted that Karzai's reliance upon donor aid for both his development and operational budget characterized a willingness to "accept

⁵⁴ Goodson, "Afghanistan in 2003," 14-22.

this state of dependency as a long-term prospect.”⁵⁵ From the United States alone, the Afghan government has received billions of dollars in assistance, not accounting for the billions in “off-budget” aid given to donor-driven projects.⁵⁶ This dependency forced Karzai to tolerate the actions of the U.S. military and corrupt USAID contractors even when those actions highly offended Afghan sympathies. A telling example comes from the U.S.’ drone strike campaign, Operation Haymaker. The vast majority of those killed in this campaign were not intended targets but were still labeled by the American military as “Enemies Killed in Action.”⁵⁷ In response to the numerous cases of civilian casualties, often ignored by U.S. diplomats, Karzai was only able to provide statements of frustration, condemnation, and sorrow, urging his backers in Washington to exercise greater caution.⁵⁸ This allowed Taliban propagandists to portray him as—and many ordinary Afghans to see him as—an American puppet, a twenty-first-century Shah Shuja.⁵⁹

Despite their many differences, Islam has often unified Afghans but Karzai was unable to translate this hegemonic device into political capital because of the political constraints he faced. Ninety-nine point seven percent of the Afghan population are Muslims. Among these approximately 87% are Sunni and 13% are Shiite and the Islamic character of the state has always been respected; even the Afghan Constitution recognizes Islam as the state religion, despite the state’s growing secularism.⁶⁰ Yet many factors discredited Karzai’s status as an Islamic leader. Karzai’s association with the United States and willingness to allow non-Muslims

⁵⁵ Giustozzi, “Afghanistan: Transition without End.”

⁵⁶ United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, “Key Points — SFRC Report.”

⁵⁷ Scahill, *The Assassination Complex*, 155-157.

⁵⁸ CNN, “Karzai Calls Civilian Casualties Unacceptable.”

The Karzai administration repeatedly remarked on its lack of input regarding American airstrikes. Karzai’s spokesman, Aimal Faizi, once lamented, “We do not have joint airstrikes,... It is unilateral when it comes to an airstrike.” This quote can be accessed in the CNN article cited above.

⁵⁹ Neumann, “Failed Relations.”

⁶⁰ *The World Factbook*, “Afghanistan.”

to maintain an army in a Muslim country was a point of controversy. Karzai was also haunted by his lack of response to American troops found disrespecting Islamic values. These included negligent U.S. bombings against a wedding in Uruzgan, preventing the immediate burial of martyred Muslims, taking photographs of deceased and naked Afghan women,⁶¹ and instances where copies of the Holy Quran were burned by U.S. military personnel.⁶² Additionally, the sidelining of village mullahs and religious judges in the political process made the state, in the eyes of many, Islamic in name only.⁶³ These choices largely represented an American desire for an increasingly secular and democratic Afghan government rather than an Afghan change in preferences away from religious governance.⁶⁴

Although Karzai possessed a semblance of royal lineage as a Durrani Pashtun, justifying his rule based on monarchical tradition proved difficult as the previous king, Mohammad Zahir Shah, although elderly, was still alive and enjoyed nostalgic support from many Afghans.⁶⁵ Zahir Shah's support from the Rome Group at the Emergency Loya Jirga of 2002 also made him a serious contender for leadership. However, he was reportedly forced to withdraw his bid for the presidency by then-Defense Minister Marshal Fahim and U.S. Special Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad.⁶⁶ This lack of royal legitimacy made the Loya jirga essential to Karzai's rise. Yet this tradition, too, was spoiled by foreign interference. The 2002 Loya Jirga, meant to designate the leader of Afghanistan, consisted of actors from across Afghan society. Broad contingents of Afghan society came together to determine Afghanistan's new leader, including royalty, Sufi leaders, warlords, and feminists. Unbeknownst to them, their future had already been decided; the predetermined nature of the Loya jirga became abundantly clear when Hamid Karzai, then

⁶¹ Fisk, *The Great War for Civilisation*, 897.

⁶² Whitlock, "U.S. Troops Tried to Burn 500 Korans."

⁶³ Pandya and Laipson, "Islam and Politics."

⁶⁴ Pandya and Laipson, "Islam and Politics."

⁶⁵ Hanifi, "Editing the Past," 320

⁶⁶ Leupp, "Karzai's Bodyguard," 143-146.

still in Kandahar holding back the Taliban, was allowed to make a speech via satellite phone to the jirga and received the consistent advocacy of American and European sponsors of the jirga.⁶⁷ Any legitimacy Karzai gained from the jirgas dissipated quickly, given its extraordinary public and compromised nature. As scholar Jamil Hanifi notes:

The internationalization of the 2002 and 2003–2004 Loya Jergas made this hegemonic assembly transparent and open to critical scrutiny by outsiders. For the first time in its history this tool of deception was exposed for what it really is—a consent-producing machinery constructed out of colonial misrepresentations unrelated to the Paxtuns, Afghan tribes, or tribalism, and independent of the wishes and aspirations of the people of Afghanistan.⁶⁸

With the narrative devices of the past unavailable, Karzai's government relied on the traditional, although now differently understood, tactic of distributing rewards to potential adversaries to maintain control. His great formal power as the nation's executive allowed him to empower and co-opt potential challengers into his administration and the national ministries. Simultaneously, the president's limited informal power outside of Kabul necessitated the delegation of power to warlords and other extralegal actors at the local level.⁶⁹ As a result, corruption has manifested in two forms: the first form, political corruption, refers to corruption by high-level government officials and highlights the misuse of state assets to enrich and increase their own power, the power of family members, or other politically influential actors wherein; the second form, administrative corruption, can be understood as a state-facilitated variation of *tufangsalari*, whereby a combination of local administrators, authorities, and warlords employ their monopoly of force to spend state assets without accountability and extort the populations that live under them.⁷⁰ This corruption is often silently facilitated by the national

⁶⁷ Wissing, *Funding the Enemy*, 43.

⁶⁸ Hanifi, "Editing the Past," 319.

⁶⁹ Bacevich, *America's War*, 298.

⁷⁰ This distinction between political and administrative corruption is made across studies of corruption in Afghanistan. My definitions are loosely borrowed from the following source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Corruption in Afghanistan." The term "grand corruption" is often used synonymously with political corruption. The term "petty corruption" is also used to describe administrative corruption.

government as it turns a blind eye to predatory behavior in exchange for recognition of its authority. An implicit agreement between the national government and regional power brokers exists in which they agree not to resist one another too strongly. The non-stop extortion of monetary baksheesh (bribes), tolls, and properties is characteristic of the administrative corruption that personally impacts Afghans as they go about their daily lives. The study of these two forms of corruption, how they relate, and how they maintain the hegemonic power of the Afghan government without the explicit use of force will be the focus of the next two chapters of this work.

Chapter 3: Political Corruption: Sharing the Spoils of National Power

While every country deals with some level of political corruption, the scale of its presence in Afghanistan has led to cynicism towards, and in many cases a rejection of, the entire government. The stories of political corruption in Afghanistan are frequently reported in American newspapers and Afghanistan's TOLONews. The hundreds of investigations detailing the Afghan government's misallocation of foreign aid, meticulously documented by journalists and in reports by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), have led donor governments to give an increasing proportion of their aid to "off-budget" projects managed by private contractors rather than the Afghan government. These investigations focus on the waste of Afghanistan's most powerful: the elites who find themselves the recipients of American largesse. For these national elites, corruption is not simply waste but a state-building strategy in itself. Pillaging and carefully distributing state resources has helped guarantee support for the government from elites representing diverse spheres of the country. This pillaging

manifests itself in many innovative ways that attempt to avoid the scrutiny of international auditors. Despite this, political corruption often follows the same broad structural process:

1. Political positions are awarded based on considerations other than merit.
2. The wealth of the state is distributed for illegitimate purposes.
3. Perpetrators maintain impunity in a system lacking accountability measures and impartial arbiters of the law.

It is these three phenomena that together compose the whole of political corruption and will be observed in this chapter. Together, they unite Afghanistan's elite toward the common goal of maintaining, although often not developing, a hegemonic Afghan state.

A common method of political corruption, often ignored by foreign observers in deference to Afghan sovereignty, consists of the appointments of politicians to government offices. Under the Afghan Constitution, the president appoints all governors at the provincial and district levels, allowing him to coerce and micromanage politics at even the most local level. In making these decisions, President Karzai and his closest advisors were mired in "a complex web of multi-layered negotiations, promises, and pay-offs"⁷¹ that aimed to increase their relative power, prevent Taliban incursions, and maintain regional and national harmony. Leaders that could provide stability were tolerated, regardless of their other activities. One such leader, Abdul Raziq Achakzai, former governor of Spin Boldak and later Kandahar police chief, was known for receiving kickbacks from customs revenues, drug smuggling, extrajudicial killings, and torture, and he received consistent support and promotions from President Karzai.⁷² Conversely,

⁷¹ Mukhopadhyay, "Provincial Governors in Afghan Politics."

⁷² Bowman, "He Calmed Kandahar."

strongmen who might not cooperate often find themselves removed from their spheres of influence. Provincial and district-level officials are frequently imported into their province of duty from remote parts of the country and given minimal resources in an attempt to minimize their effectiveness. As of 2016, for example, two-thirds of district governors lacked office buildings and other basic supplies.⁷³ This serves to alienate constituents from their subnational sources of representation, weaken the power of tribal leaders now removed from their peoples, and make governors dependent upon national resources. Subnational officials find themselves dependent upon the national government for budgets and aid contracts that are near exclusively channeled through Kabul.⁷⁴

Appointments to national positions often endure the same corrupt bargaining process as governors, but the objective of balancing the ethnic composition of government gains importance. Rather than implementing selection criteria based upon national political appeal or competence, positions are doled out to shore up support from the leaders of the nation's minority communities. Since the adoption of the 2004 constitution, Afghanistan's president has always been a Pashtun; its first vice president, a Tajik, or Uzbek in the exceptional case of General Abdul Rashid Dostum; its second vice president, a Hazara. Tajiks, as the nation's largest minority group and one that was crucial in driving the Taliban out of Afghanistan in 2001, have received particular clout in the nation's bureaucracy. After Karzai became president, the nation's most powerful ministries—defense, interior, intelligence, and foreign—were all placed under the control of lieutenants of Ahmed Shah Massoud, the famous Panjshiri (Tajik) commander.⁷⁵ After a dispute between Karzai and Tajik leaders over demonstrations that turned violent in the North, some Tajiks in the Defense Ministry were replaced by members of rival Northern

⁷³ Partlow, *A Kingdom of Their Own*, 17-25.

⁷⁴ Chene, "U4 Expert Answer."

⁷⁵ Partlow, *A Kingdom of Their Own*, 61.

Alliance groups, further highlighting the open ethnicization of national political appointments.⁷⁶ Despite these occasional bureaucratic skirmishes, collusion in the pursuit of power between Afghanistan's ethnic elites ensures everyone's continued participation in the nation's corruption networks by guaranteeing them an adequate share of the spoils.

These spoils have primarily come from the billions of dollars of reconstruction aid that the U.S. and other foreign governments have provided the Afghan government.⁷⁷ Both U.S. generals and development officials, many following the prescriptions of counterinsurgency strategy, were convinced that investing huge sums of money in infrastructure projects would win the war against the Taliban; the budgets were so large that the Pentagon could not even spend everything it was allocated.⁷⁸ As the SIGAR John Sopko notes, corrupt officials and warlords "dip their hands into the streams of cash pouring into a small and fragile economy."⁷⁹ U.S. aid has been so bountiful and unrelenting that it has incentivized corruption. Foreign largesse, combined with a lack of transparency and donor oversight, boosted the salaries and prestige of U.S. private contractors and Afghanistan's politicians but has had an underwhelming impact on Afghanistan's development.

Making aid dollars disappear has become something of an art for Afghanistan's officials; embezzlement takes many forms and has been difficult to track. The presence of ghost workers on the government payroll is one of the most common. These ghosts can be teachers, students, police, soldiers, or even whole schools. These people, or buildings, although fictitious, are reported to exist, allocated salaries or funding, and then these funds are misappropriated as kickbacks to the officials in charge of overseeing the project. For example, in Herat province,

⁷⁶ Rubin, *Afghanistan from the Cold War Through the War on Terror*, 351.

⁷⁷ Mashal, "Afghanistan Needs Billions in Aid."

⁷⁸ Whitlock, "Built to Fail."

⁷⁹ Dyer, "US Aid Fuelled Corruption."

after an examination of 25 USAID-funded schools, the SIGAR found that only 23% of the total students enrolled were attending school.⁸⁰ While some students simply might have gone unobserved due to absence, the greatness of this discrepancy indicates that the number of students enrolled was inflated to increase funding for the school that would wind up in the pockets of those who exaggerated the enrollment figures. Similarly, the Afghan military has been at the center of an even larger fraud. Between the Afghan National Defense Security Forces (ANDSF) and the Afghan National Army (ANA), a combined 35,000 soldiers and police were unaccounted for after the SIGAR attempted to verify troop numbers.⁸¹ Ghost salaries are often acquired by national and local level officials, although national officials are usually the ones to approve funding despite the doctored numbers, and are yet another crucial bond linking the national and sub-national forms of governance. Given the low salaries of government officials, lack of accountability, and unending funding, these schemes are wildly popular among Afghan politicians.

Embezzlement has been made even simpler by the United States' complex auditing procedures, which allows for billions of dollars to remain unaccounted.⁸² Riches hitherto unknown amongst Afghanistan's elite are traded through negotiations unbeknownst to anyone but themselves for vanity projects and personal enrichment. President Karzai's brother, Mahmoud Karzai, and his many business ventures provide one case study. His restoration of the unproductive Ghorī cement factory, the opening of Afghanistan's first Toyota dealership, and the

⁸⁰ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, "School in Herat Province."

⁸¹ Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, "Report to United States Congress," (2019).

⁸² Reconstruction funds are split between the Department of State, the Department of Defense, and USAID. Some of the largest line items on the budget, as of 2020, are the Afghan Security Forces Fund (ASFF), the Economic Support Fund (ESF), the Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP), and International Narcotics Control and Law Enforcement (INCLE). These various funds make centralizing information into one place difficult for auditors. This is not to mention the relationship between U.S. politicians and some of the private contractors employed by the U.S. government which might incentivize limiting the capabilities of auditors. For a comprehensive picture of how reconstruction funds are distributed view Appendix B of the following source: Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, "Report to United States Congress," (2020).

construction of the suburban oasis of Ayno Maina are all superfluous projects in a country that struggles to fulfill basic human needs. Although President Karzai has signaled his disapproval regarding some of these projects,⁸³ Mahmoud's ability to pursue unproductive pet projects with government favoritism is nepotism in its most brazen form. Yet these privileges belong to more than just the president's direct family. Afghanistan's national ministries have also been rife with underreported corruption among elites whose names frequently remain unknown to the public. Through the ministries, elites give preferential treatment to those with wealth or important connections to increase their wealth and power. This is succinctly pointed out by Khan Zaman Amarkhail, Chairman of the Afghan Anti-Corruption Network, in his condemnation of corruption within the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum:

At least 100,000 USD has been taken as bribes for each mining contract to be given to their favorite people⁸⁴

Similar corruption is common across government projects. The Sardar Mohammed Dawood Khan military hospital, described as the "crown jewel" of the Afghan health system,⁸⁵ was the site of a \$180 million embezzlement scandal conducted by officials involved in its construction and in which the complicity of American army commanders is widely alleged.⁸⁶ Even the distribution of government scholarships to children living in orphanages has been a source of controversy, as those with connections to elites or to parents who were martyred working for the security services have been given undue preference.⁸⁷

Afghanistan's elites are free to pursue these corrupt practices largely as a result of their impunity. Through the layers of national bureaucracy and clever means of embezzlement,

⁸³ Trofimov, "Karzai Brothers Patch Up Property Dispute."

⁸⁴ Jahanmal, "Report: Corruption Increases in Mines Ministry Contracts."

⁸⁵ Wendle, "'Auschwitz-like' Afghan Military Hospital Investigation."

⁸⁶ *TOLO News*, "Afghan Military Hospital Says it Rejects Corruption."

⁸⁷ Bashardost, "Corruption Alleged in Scholarships."

holding particular individuals accountable is difficult, in general. Establishing a sufficient burden of proof and finding an impartial judge to try the case is seldom possible. Even when those responsible for corruption can be identified, the chance of punishment is marginal. This reality is most transparent in the scandal surrounding Kabul Bank, in which several high-level officials were implicated yet few faced repercussions.

The Kabul Bank was founded in 2004 and celebrated as Afghanistan's first private bank, but, in its inception, it illustrated the inability of Afghanistan's political figures and nascent business community to remain separate. The bank originated with a \$5,000 bribe to the Afghanistan Investment Support Agency to acquire the bank's license.⁸⁸ Led by Bank Chairman Sher Khan Farnood and CEO Khalil Ferozi, a former bodyguard of Farnood and fake currency trader, Kabul Bank's list of influential shareholders consisted of major Afghan politicians and their relatives.⁸⁹ After an investigation by the British-led Major Crimes Task Force (MCTF), the bank's unethical practices were exposed. The bank's shareholders were actively stealing depositor's assets. Two sets of accounts were kept, one real and the other to fool regulators.⁹⁰ Millions of dollars were embezzled from the bank through fake loans and investments to Afghanistan's elite using fake companies, products paid for at inflated prices, and investments funneled into Dubai through Farnood's Shaheen Exchange.⁹¹ Furthermore, the bank contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to President Karzai's 2009 reelection campaign and bribed members of parliament to turn a blind eye to their activities and to favor President Karzai's agenda.⁹² When depositors became aware of the bank's malpractice, they made a run on the

⁸⁸ While bribes are standard in Afghanistan's ministries, Partlow in *A Kingdom of Their Own*, claims that this bribe was considered exceptionally high and suggests that the bribe might have been to avoid scrutiny during the background checks of the bank's business partners, which included current fugitives.

⁸⁹ Zaheer, and Siddiqui, "Kabul Bank's Corrupt Shareholders Named."

⁹⁰ McLeod, "Special Report."

⁹¹ McLeod, "Special Report."

⁹² Filkins, "The Afghan Bank Heist."

bank, causing it to collapse and the Afghan government to take control of it. In total auditors discovered a sum unaccounted for of \$930 million.⁹³

Accountability for these missing funds was scarce. The Kabul Bank Special Tribunal (KBST), supported by President Ashraf Ghani, was intended to bring justice to millions of defrauded Afghans. Instead, its investigations were so limited in scope that most cases were ignored. Although Farnood identified 227 beneficiaries of corruption, including cases involving former vice presidents Marshal Fahim, Younis Qanooni, and Abdul Rashid Dostum, cases involving politically connected people were disproportionately sidelined.⁹⁴ Of those on Farnood's list, only the 62 people who willfully acknowledged their debts repaid them; the rest were ignored or recommended for investigations that usually did not take place.⁹⁵ The tribunals that did take place were noted for their lack of witnesses, disproportionate sentences, and fast decisions, which some believe to have been made before hearings were even held.⁹⁶ Aside from Farnood and Ferozi, who were both handed five-year sentences and multi-hundred million dollar fines, the KBST focused on minor actors in the scandal. Employees of Kabul Bank and Da Afghanistan Bank —the nation's central bank charged with overseeing financial activities— have been the main defendants for their role as accomplices or their role in impeding government investigations.⁹⁷ However, even prison sentences have not been sufficient to alienate corrupt actors. While still serving his prison sentence, Khalil Ferozi was identified as a shareholder in the government-supported Smart City project and signed a memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of Urban Development.⁹⁸ This arrangement was only terminated after public backlash grew too great. To date, the Kabul Bank case has been the largest corruption scandal in

⁹³ Strand, "Elite Capture of Kabul Bank," 180.

⁹⁴ McLeod, "Special Report."

⁹⁵ McLeod, "Special Report."

⁹⁶ McLeod, "Special Report."

⁹⁷ McLeod, "Special Report."

⁹⁸ *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, "The Afghan Government and the 'Smart City' Debacle."

Afghanistan's modern history. Yet, even the man at its helm had no problem finding new projects on which to partner with the government. Afghanistan's culture of impunity is so thorough that participating in corruption comes at almost no cost to elites; this is important but only part of why corruption is so prevalent.

National politics in Afghanistan has historically been governed by the necessity of placating the nation's ethnic groups. In the past, this was done via a decentralized state structure where ethnic minorities could govern themselves as they wished with little opposition; unwelcome intrusions into rural life were successfully resisted. Because of the United States' insistence on a strong national government that can combat terrorism, this way of governance is confined to the past. Despite this radical alteration of Afghanistan's political structure, all major ethnic groups have bought into the new governing arrangements provided by the 2004 constitution, even though it largely precludes non-Pashtuns from holding the extremely powerful position of president. What has united the elites of Afghanistan's ethnic groups behind this government and allowed some to accept a fixed share of national power is the distribution of money and power. Through every step of the political and legal process, Afghanistan's elites are provided the opportunity to enrich and protect themselves. They can scheme and trade favors for political positions, winning ministries and governorships for their friends and coethnic associates. They can use those positions to give and receive kickbacks through myriad methods of embezzlement using millions of dollars of poorly-tracked foreign aid. And, if caught, they can rest assured they will escape punishment, as everyone in government has a vested interest in ensuring that accountability never becomes the norm. The presence of corruption in Afghanistan is well-known among the country's observers; what goes unnoticed is its function. Among

national politicians, corruption not only serves greed but it performs the function of the past, and now defunct, hegemonic narratives: facilitating ethnic cooperation and national stability.

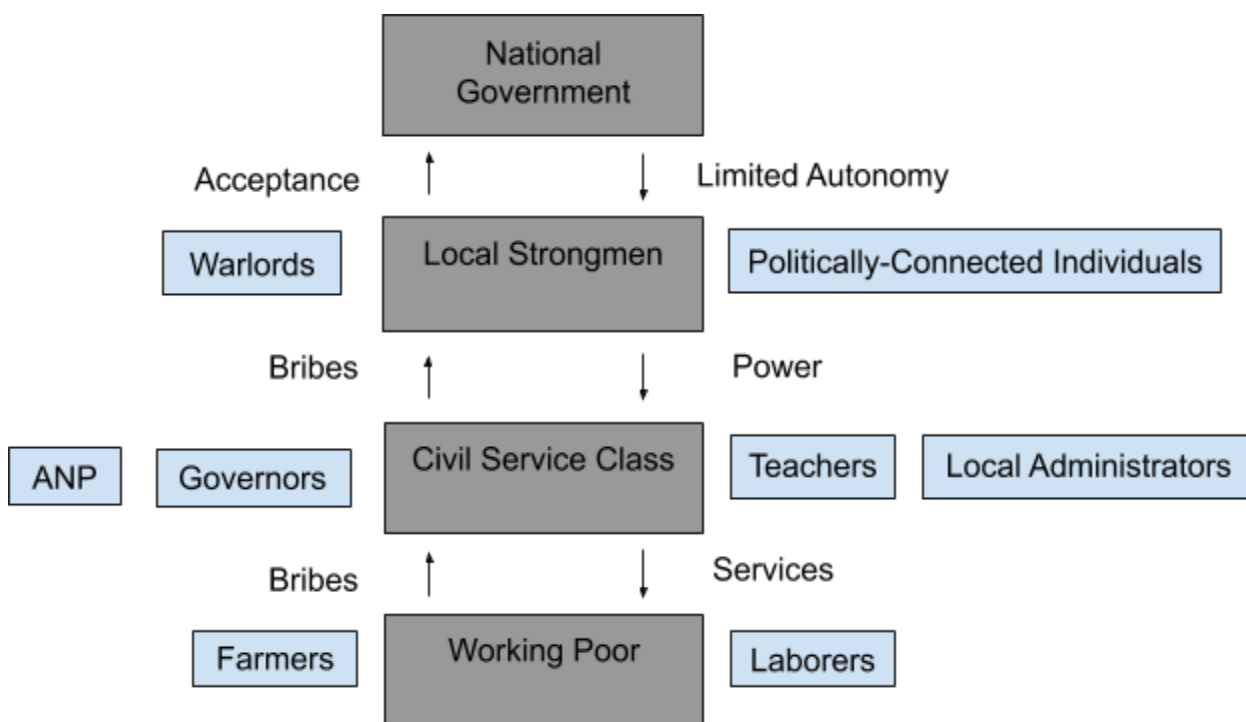
Chapter 4: Administrative Corruption: Extorting Those Below

As outlined in Chapter 1, Afghanistan's history is one of rebellion against authoritative governments. Yet aside from the Taliban, local power-holders have been docile toward national authority since the American intervention. So what precisely has prevented Afghanistan's local power-holders—tribal chiefs, warlords, mullahs, drug traffickers, etc—from attempting to reassert the greater authority they held across the country before the American invasion? The answer lies in an implicit deal between national politicians and local strongmen. In exchange for accepting the national government's authority over many issues, local strongmen are given free rein over their province. Using this power, local strongmen can retain much of their authority and enrich themselves, while enjoying the protection of ISAF and Afghan government soldiers. Local politicians and government employees are sidelined in this arrangement. Poor and under-resourced, they often turn to corruption and illegal arrangements to ensure their power and safety. The illegal methods through which government-backed strongmen and local politicians acquire wealth, commonly referred to as instances of administrative corruption, rarely make headlines but belong to the form of corruption that ordinary Afghans encounter regularly.

The distinction between administrative corruption and political corruption may lead one to believe they are separate issues. In fact, administrative corruption is but a derivative of its political counterpart. The nature of political corruption, with its insulated multi-ethnic elite who require impunity, necessitates a disempowered and subservient local governing apparatus that cannot resist on behalf of frustrated local populations. For this reason, national officials tend to

underfund provincial and local governors and afford them poor salaries to limit their capabilities. Only through corruption can a local official consolidate his rule and sideline his rivals who might yield extraordinary informal power. Consequently, local officials contribute to the construction of hegemony through their own marginalization. Their lack of independent power allows national figures a monopoly on state-building. Local figures are left to the much simpler task of surviving, except for a few strongmen, often wielding power independently, that cooperate with the government and reap huge financial benefits for doing so. A hierarchy of corruption is thereby constructed. Local populations are left as the waiting victims of informal powerbrokers in the extralegal economy, underpaid low-level officials are left with few options but using their positions to extort the working poor, and the most fortunate strongmen rule with impunity as long as they remain loyal to the national government (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: Class Hierarchy of Administrative Corruption



Many in the American national security community have acknowledged that mitigating the presence of administrative corruption is essential in getting Afghans to accept their government rather than informal actors.⁹⁹ Under counterinsurgency strategy, General McChrystal emphasized the importance of winning “the 80 percent” of Afghans who supported neither their government nor the Taliban by reducing the graft of local administrators.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, this corruption has been described as “the biggest factor internal to Afghanistan harming the [international] Coalition’s campaign.”¹⁰¹ Yet reducing it has proved difficult, as it invades every sector of governmental activity. While performing mundane tasks such as registering a business, proving one’s claim to a plot of land, or even walking past police, paying extortive bribes is often the only way forward. As President Ashraf Ghani noted in the 2009 book he co-authored:

Making headway most often requires a bribe. In Afghanistan in 2002 a citizen had to pay \$8 in bribes, almost half the monthly wage, to obtain the twenty signatures required from functionaries spread out across the city and to fill out twenty-four pages of documentation, consuming as much as a week of that person’s life — all for the “pleasure” of paying a \$2 customs fee.¹⁰²

These bribes are particularly harmful to Afghanistan’s poorest citizens, who spend the largest portion of their incomes paying bribes for services that are supposed to be free.¹⁰³ As a result, poor Afghans are marginalized from the formal economy. In large numbers, they are forced to turn to the extralegal economy, consisting largely of unregistered businesses and properties, drug trafficking, and poppy cultivation, which begets even greater corruption, as only informal actors

⁹⁹ Because of this, it may at first appear that corruption is ipso facto working against the goal of building hegemony. This would be a misperception. Rather, hegemony is built among leaders in Afghanistan. As long as leaders do not rebel (and they are incentivized not to, as discussed in Chapter 3), the populations below them can be freely coerced. However, when disgruntled civilians turn to the Taliban, this does provide a challenge to government hegemony. This is why corruption has been of concern to some within the U.S. military, most notably Admiral Michael Mullen.

¹⁰⁰ Chayes, *Thieves of State*, 30.

¹⁰¹ Carroll, “Afghan Corruption-The Greatest Obstacle to Victory,” 873.

¹⁰² Ghani and Lockhart, *Fixing Failed States*, 21.

¹⁰³ Singh, “Anti-corruption Strategies in Afghanistan,” 46.

can enforce legitimate, although not legally recognized, property rights.¹⁰⁴ As of 2007, only about 10 percent of economic activity was within the formal taxable economic system while almost half of the economy was based on illegal narcotics trading.¹⁰⁵ While the 90% of the economy that goes untaxed is inaccessible to the government, warlords are able to tax and regulate this shadow economy with coercion and other illegitimate means. The consequence is a broken social contract in which citizens are forced into the chaos of the informal system due to the expense and monotony of formal government procedures.

While administrative corruption is harshest on the most vulnerable, the line between oppressor and victim is far less clear than in the realm of national politics. Many local politicians and administrators, due to the limited resources and salaries provided by Kabul, face severe economic anxiety. As of 2002, the salary of the average Afghan civil servant was, at \$28 per month, just below the nation's poverty line.¹⁰⁶ During the same year, ministers received approximately \$40 per month and supreme court judges received \$80 per month.¹⁰⁷ These low salaries for highly-skilled and important jobs incentivize misbehavior and poor job performance. As Shamsullah Jawid, former head of the Anti-Corruption Unit of Northern Afghanistan points out, the main reasons for corruption among local officials include low pay, lack of job security, unemployment among family members, and a lack of confidence in the country's political future.¹⁰⁸ This class of civil servants is also the most politically vulnerable, often treated with disdain by the Taliban and as potential rivals by the national government. As a result, Afghan governors often face assassination attempts and are forced, like the poor, to rely upon the informal powerbrokers from whom they are ostensibly providing an alternative. Afghan

¹⁰⁴ De Soto, *The Mystery of Capital*, 153-162.

¹⁰⁵ Hamid, "Endangered Livelihoods," 103-115.

¹⁰⁶ Chesterman, "Walking Softly in Afghanistan," 43.

¹⁰⁷ Chesterman, "Walking Softly in Afghanistan," 43.

¹⁰⁸ Habib, "Local Government in Afghanistan," 1-16.

governors who align themselves with these informal actors tend to counter insurgency and terrorist activities more efficiently than those who meet Western ideals of “professionalism,” which includes impartiality toward local affairs and professional competence.¹⁰⁹ For local government officials, corruption bridges the wide gap within their jobs between risk and reward. Connections with informal actors provide cash and security where they are otherwise scarce.

Contemporary analyses of corruption at the subnational level tend to highlight the importance of profession rather than class, but given the commonality of issues between professions in the civil service sector, this seems a mistake. Governors, police, and local administrators all find themselves in the precarious position of being underfunded and endangered; their actions are all similar in principle and only differ due to the administrative tools at their disposal. Police, for example, have a notorious reputation for corruption. In 2006, the Afghanistan Highway Police (AHP), charged with defending the country’s major roadways, were phased out entirely due in part to their insistence on bribes,¹¹⁰ likewise, the much larger Afghan National Police (ANP) are well-known for their “arrest, bribe, release” shakedown. Following this formula, citizens are arbitrarily arrested and detained, beaten, at times even tortured, and subsequently released upon paying the demanded bribe.¹¹¹ Similarly, the Afghan National Security Forces, in charge of poppy eradication, also extract bribes from farmers hoping to avoid the chemical spraying of their crops. This bond between poppy cultivators and authorities is continually strengthened as the market is consolidated when those who cannot afford to pay bribes are forced out.¹¹² Even the educational sector is rife with corruption. USAID has noted that the low salaries received by teachers lead them to prioritize private tutoring and

¹⁰⁹ Englehart, and Grant, "Governors, Governance, and Insurgency," 299-324.

¹¹⁰ Wilder, *Cops or Robbers?*

¹¹¹ Wilder, *Cops or Robbers?*

¹¹² Rubin, *Afghanistan from the Cold War Through the War on Terror*, 396.

receiving bribes for grades rather than school attendance and public instruction.¹¹³ Countless locally-administered professions could be accounted for here; what these professions share is their need to leverage what little power they have to elicit bribes on which they can sustain themselves.

The most powerful participants in local governing arrangements are the warlords and local strongmen. These figures, typically the same actors who were prominent in the anarchic pre-invasion period, have often enjoyed the monopoly of force in their regions of the country for decades. Due to their large armies and lack of organized opposition, the national government has chosen to co-opt these warlords as partners in their state-building efforts rather than cast them aside. As a result, warlords have often worked in concert with national officials, respecting national priorities and working within the structures of government, creating the situation scholar Dipaly Mukhopadhyay has called “warlord as bureaucrat.”¹¹⁴ These warlords often work in collaboration with U.S. and NATO forces as well. For example, Gul Agha Sherzai (in Kandahar) and Jan Muhammad Khan (in Uruzgan) were long known to provide combat assistance to U.S. forces and help them eliminate “Taliban” from their region, a label they conveniently applied to their rivals.¹¹⁵ These rivals, often amenable to U.S. and Afghan government interests, could then be captured and detained for years in the Guantanamo Bay detention camp, where they would be deemed enemy combatants, tortured, and denied rights to a trial or hearings.¹¹⁶ The elimination of these rivals centralized power at the provincial level, ensuring that the Afghan government and American military had only one strongman to coordinate with, rather than needing to win the consent of the entire population living under him. Despite this unity between local strongmen,

¹¹³ United States Agency for International Development, “Assessment of Corruption.”

¹¹⁴ Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State*, 4.

¹¹⁵ Anand, *No Good Men*, 109-125.

¹¹⁶ Greenberg, *Rogue Justice*, 140-141.

the Afghan government, and the United States, strongmen retain significant informal connections that allow them to act with absolute freedom. Their relationships with local militias allow them to occupy land and then charge the owners rent to return.¹¹⁷ They are also frequently involved in drug trafficking and transport mafias and appropriate a significant share of national funds for themselves through overt corruption and the collection of bribes from the civil service class.¹¹⁸ In essence, Afghanistan's warlords and strongmen have played a peculiar role in the political economy, as they are the only actors organized enough to legitimately challenge the state from within. While warlords have played a role in state-building, largely through their compliance with the national government, they are often noted for their destructive role in the perpetuation of corruption that delegitimizes the state.¹¹⁹ Regardless, the Afghan government has had no choice but to tolerate the warlords, otherwise, they risk provoking them into joining the insurgency or undermining government authority to a greater extent than they already do. The current impossibility of eliminating warlords as a class poses a major challenge to opponents of administrative corruption.

Through its inter-class character, administrative corruption implicates all levels of local society. Each class can expect to pay bribes or cede authority to those above them and receive bribes or deference from those below them. This structure most harms the poor, as bribes are extracted from them while they receive only access to limited basic services in return. They are also often faced with the steepest bribes relative to their already meager income. This is, in part, a result of the civil service class attempting to extract from them an amount capable of fulfilling their own needs like compensating for paying the bribes requested by local strongmen.

Strongmen have accrued even greater benefits than during their days of pre-invasion anarchy.

¹¹⁷ Özerdem, and Sofizada, "Sustainable Reintegration to Returning Refugees," 88.

¹¹⁸ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Corruption in Afghanistan."

¹¹⁹ Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State*, 2.

The arrival of a state apparatus has provided even more ways to extort bribes from those in need of state services and the nation's civil service workers. The civil service class finds itself on both sides of corruption, as its victim and its perpetrator. These poorly paid Afghans often act out of perceived necessity rather than greed, trying to subsidize their pittance of a salary. This hierarchy illuminates a crucial dynamic. Local actors are left to fend for themselves while those with regional strength and connections are rewarded for their compliance with the national government. Thus, the primary purpose of administrative corruption is to co-opt potential opposition and marginalize the lower classes in Afghan society, leaving state-building efforts to the national elites. While the labels 'political corruption' and 'administrative corruption' define different phenomena, they are both the consequence of the national government attempting to maintain and build its hegemony without the traditional ideological narratives that once played a more significant role in persuading Afghans to submit to their rulers.

Conclusion

Mahatma Gandhi once instructed his countrymen to “imagine the whole nation, vivisected and torn into pieces; how could it be made into a nation?”¹²⁰ While he was speaking of the neighboring Indian subcontinent, this challenge of imagination has been the task of Afghans for centuries. Historically, Afghan nation-building was the product of varying amounts of coercion, patrimonial exchange, and celebrated cultural narratives that arose over centuries of stubborn independence and resistance to authority. These narratives included traditions recalling the nation's piety as an Islamic territory, its resistance to foreign occupation, its long-respected monarchy, and its tribal jirgas. For centuries, Afghanistan's elites returned to these familiar narratives, along with exchange and coercion, to legitimize their rule in times of uncertainty.

¹²⁰ Sen, *Identity and Violence*, 169.

The American invasion ended this state of affairs by destroying the usability of Afghanistan's centuries-long cultural narratives for the political elite. This reduced the state's legitimacy and forced elites to rely on heavier doses of corruption to induce cooperation and trust between one another. An abundance of foreign aid has expanded the level of corruption to an unprecedented scale and allowed the national government to successfully co-opt enough of its potential opposition. Every resource of the state —power, jobs, land, foreign aid, special projects, administrative positions— has become a bargaining chip for Afghan elites. This is the paradoxical nature of Afghan corruption; while holding the state together by uniting elites, it simultaneously delegitimizes the state through the resentment it conjures among local populations. As long as aid continues to flow and co-opted strongmen dominate provincial politics, this state of affairs is sustainable although far from ideal.

Due to the massive powers granted to the national government by the 2004 constitution, political corruption perpetrated by national elites ultimately drives the structure of Afghanistan's federal system and corruption networks. National officials, particularly the office of the president, carefully manage local politics, maintaining their power by keeping local officials dependent and loyal. Administrative corruption is a byproduct of this political structure. Government-aligned strongmen and powerful warlords extort those working in the civil service sector who are in turn forced to prey upon the working poor. In this relationship, acts of corruption by one class are the necessitated product of the actions of the immediately superior class. This chain of causality always refers back to the national government.

If corruption is to be overcome, it must be confronted nationally rather than locally and understood as the result of the degradation of Afghanistan's nationally-unifying ideology rather than simply culture or greed. As long as coercion remains an unacceptable means of unifying the

nation, only ideological approaches to nation-building can fill the hegemonic vacuum now occupied by systemic corruption.¹²¹ While many scholars have proposed complex technocratic agendas to confront corruption, Afghanistan's history provides its own solution. This solution is one of narrative, custom, pride, and tradition. Although imperfect, it has united Afghanistan more than any foreign power ever could; reviving this history rather than fighting it is essential to defeating corruption.

¹²¹ The amount of coercion needed to significantly reduce corruption would be astronomical. Not only would it need to destroy the Taliban insurgency and other potential rivals to the government, it would need to punish corrupt actors with sufficient consistency. This approach was, in essence, the Taliban's strategy to end corruption in provinces where it enjoyed no ideological sympathy. If Afghanistan is ever to enjoy a period of relative peace or democracy, the state cannot be primarily maintained through coercive means.

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