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THE UNITED STATES' INTERVENTION IN AFGHANISTAN: DYSFUNCTION OF A CENTRALIZED AUTHORITY IN A DIVERSE NATION¹

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Abstract: *This article reviews nation-building strategy effort led by the US in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. The history of nation-building efforts is retraced from the creation of the Republic to its ultimate collapse. The central argument of the article stresses the dysfunctionality of the centralization approach adopted by several successive administrations in Kabul with the backing of the United States. The inquiry reveals the problems of implementation of this strategy as well as the failure of this idea in general. In terms of implementation, centralization efforts were met with widespread corruption and cronyism. These trends disrupted any American effort to impose a centralized system of governance in Afghanistan. A more important aspect of the problem is that the centralization strategy did not account for the diversity of the Afghan society. American centralization strategy blamed warlords, who in fact were reputable regional leaders, for all the chaotic developments faced by Afghanistan. That disregard for ethnopolitics led to an escalation of power struggle inside the country, countering the efforts of the central administration headed by the president to extend its influence beyond Kabul. These processes transformed Afghan politics into a zero-sum game rendering the whole nation-building effort ineffective. In the end, the Republic collapsed with withdrawal of the foreign presence, essentially confirming the dysfunctionality of centralization approach. Currently, the Taliban relies on essentially the same strategy of centralized authority in spite of being deprived of extensive foreign aid. Whether this effort to re-assert Pashtun dominance in the absence of foreign intervention will succeed remains to be seen.*

Keywords: Afghanistan, the United States, intervention, nation-building, centralization.

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Among the diversity of views on the nature of the conflict in Afghanistan, its internal and external drivers², one core, and majorly under-researched, element is the arrangement of political authority in the period of 2002–2021, when a pro-American regime ruled Afghanistan.

The mainstream thinking claimed that “successful elections, institution-building, the rule of law, and economic and social development are mutually reinforcing goals. Progress toward achieving any one of them is bound to promote progress toward achieving the others. At the same time, setbacks in any of them will have negative effects on the others” [Khalilzad, 2010, p. 49].

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² See, for instance [Maloney, 2007; Konarovskii, 2011; Malkasian, 2013; Nasr, 2013; Gall, 2014; Gopal, 2014; Belokrenitskii, 2016; Harpviken, Tadjbakhsh, 2016; O'Connell, 2017; Rubin, 2020].

Warlords were viewed as an important source of disorder and insecurity [Marten, 2006]. Instead, the U.S. pushed for centralization of political authority in Kabul. However, the centralization effort and suppression of so-called “warlords”, who were actually regional leaders, ignored the ethnopolitics of Afghanistan.

Considering the literature on ethnopolitics of Afghanistan, the Russian school of Afghan studies has traditionally been strong in these issues, prevailingly admitting the rising strength of ethno-political identity bound together with the erosion of the Pashtun community’s historical quest for dominant role in the Afghan statehood [Konarovskii, 2011; Konarovskii, 2014; Korgun, 2014; Nessar, 2015; Knyazev, Gulam, 2023]. Cooperation and consensus-building was essential for the effective functioning of the authority centralized in Kabul, which was continuously emphasized by scholars [Korgun, 2013; Konarovskii, 2020]. In reality, the struggle for power in the central authority has consistently intensified.

This article examines how efforts to build a strong centralized authority, contrary to expectations of forging national unity, have instead polarized and destabilized Afghanistan.

THE GENESIS OF ANTI-WARLORD AND PRO-NATION-BUILDING NARRATIVE

The United States aligned with the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, a diverse and decentralized collection of mostly ethnic and regional non-Pashtun militias (Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara), rapidly defeating the Taliban and their Al-Qaeda³ partners in November 2001. After that victory, at the Bonn Conference in December 2001, American and United Nations mediators supported the establishment of a temporary power-sharing arrangement that appointed Hamid Karzai, a Pashtun exile with limited internal support, as president. He was supposed to share power with more powerful Northern Alliance leaders who had fought the Taliban.

Karzai and his international backers have never felt comfortable with this arrangement, believing that the position of President was far too weak. Karzai’s foreigner backers believed a weak presidency would increase internal tensions, emboldening local leaders to challenge the authority of the government and returning it to the chaotic conditions that initially led to the Taliban rule [Rashid, Rubin, 2003]. They thought that a powerful central authority with a strong president at its helm would translate into an efficient and reliable government and prevent a return to instability [Dobbins, 2008, p. 179]. This aligned closely with the idea of a strong Pashtun-led centralized state espoused by many Pashtun intellectuals.

Two years after the Bonn Conference, in late 2003, foreign mediators backed Karzai’s effort to pressure the Afghan Constitutional Loya Jirga to codify a centralized political system built around a powerful president. Non-Pashtuns reacted with a significant if under-reported revolt against centralization calling instead for devolution of political power. They eventually halted the Loya Jirga. To overcome this revolt, the international mediators promised more financial and military support and accepted the limited use of regional languages while threatening those who resisted. The Loya Jirga finally approved the Constitution, which precluded political parties associated with the Northern Alliance from having any role in presidential and parliamentary elections while allowing the president to appoint all provincial governors, mayors, and police chiefs throughout the country.

To justify this quest for a strong presidency that he could not create merely through the support of his ethnic group, Karzai and many of his foreign backers tried to discredit regional leaders by calling them “warlords”.

In the 1980s, the Western notion about the war in Afghanistan was a “David versus Goliath” struggle between Islamic freedom fighters (mujahideen) and the Soviet Army. After the Soviet

³ Prohibited in the Russian Federation.

withdrawal, this narrative quickly evaporated as competing mujahideen groups fought for power in Kabul. As the war was mostly concentrated in and around Kabul, the majority of the country was relatively peaceful and run by various regional leaders. Outside of Kabul, only Kandahar mirrored the battle for power in the capital and was in disarray and conflict. It is here that the Taliban emerged late in 1994 and began its quest for power in Afghanistan. The Taliban framed this drive for power as a return to Pashtun cultural traditions and Islamic faith (order) from the apostate behavior of those fighting for power in Kabul and disarray caused by them. It was this Taliban narrative that in large part would ultimately emerge as the “warlord” narrative after September 11, 2001.

This Taliban narrative drew significant support among the Durrani Pashtun and Afghan Pashtun diaspora, as well as in Pakistan’s military, intelligence circles and the press [Rashid, 2000]. This narrative grew as the Taliban successfully defeated its opponents and conquered Kabul in September 1996. Some experts in the West also promoted the Taliban view of it being a stabilizing power⁴.

However, the notion that the Taliban were returning Afghanistan to its Islamic and native political roots was overshadowed by their brutal tactics, treatment of minorities, religious strictures and most importantly by their alliances with Osama bin Laden. After the Al-Qaeda⁵ had engineered attacks against the US embassies in East Africa in 1998, this positive narrative about the Taliban stalled in the West as they started to be seen as more sinister and dangerous⁶. Still, those fighting the Taliban, the Northern Alliance (supported by Russia, India and Iran), were never viewed in the West as entirely legitimate rulers.

The key elements of the Taliban’s depiction of their enemies became the default Karzai and Western narratives after the Taliban were removed from power in 2001. While regional leaders were no longer seen as apostates or un-Islamic, they were increasingly blamed for the civil war and labeled as brutal. The anti-warlord narrative represented the view that the breakdown of the Afghan state was ultimately caused by the rise of regional warlords.

Karzai and his backers argued that the Taliban had arisen because these “warlords” promoted chaos and civil war after the collapse of the pro-Soviet regime. They successfully made the case that the defeat of the Taliban left the job half finished. So, it was not sufficient to defeat the Taliban: the “warlords” had to be weakened, isolated and removed by building a vigorous Afghan government and army [Saikal, 2004]. In the interim, the Karzai government needed more foreign troops to reinforce his presidential power to keep the “warlords” in check. The West, which hoped that it could correct its past failures, blindly followed this narrative. The anti-warlord narrative was at the core of justifying massive nation-building efforts in the Afghan state.

BUILDING CENTRALIZED AUTHORITY IN A DIVIDED COUNTRY

Despite appointing some of these “warlords” as his first and second Vice-Presidents during his 2004 presidential campaign, Karzai still garnered significant international sympathy with his anti-warlord and pro-nation-building narrative. In order to weaken the “warlords” and secure their political support, Karzai brought them to Kabul, detaching them from their base of support, all

⁴ In the second half of the 1990s, the Center for Afghanistan Studies at the University of Nebraska and the Atlantic Council of the United States were the key think-tanks arguing in favor of the US finding common ground with the Taliban, portraying the latter as the stabilizing force.

⁵ Prohibited in the Russian Federation.

⁶ Still, non-official contacts with the Taliban have not been nullified. In the summer before 9/11, the Atlantic Council brought a high-profile figure from the Taliban government to Washington for non-public expert meetings.

while avoiding any potential political backlash. In October 2004, Karzai won in the first round of the first ever popular presidential election with 55 percent of the vote.

Karzai's supporters highlighted that this was over three times more than the result of the next candidate (16 percent) and the press reinforced Karzai's "substantial" victory [Roberts, 2004]. But Karzai's 55 percent was a remarkably low total, considering all the foreign political and financial support and a significant pro-Karzai voter fraud that was reported. The vote split along ethnic lines. Karzai was able to run up improbable victories in the Pashtun areas, in particular, the South and East, but decisively lost the non-Pashtun territories. Nationally, three leaders (a Tajik, a Hazara, and an Uzbek) together won around 40 percent of the vote.

Karzai presented these results as legitimizing his rule although in reality they represented a country divided along ethnic lines. Lured by the prospect of a capable partner in Kabul, most foreign observers chose to accept his version.

Karzai portrayed himself as the champion of the country's democratic future while blaming the Northern Alliance for the instability and civil war. This narrative was used to push for disarmament of anti-Taliban militias. Karzai called foreign troops to support his authority while weakening unruly "warlords" in North and West.

At the same time, Karzai put increasing pressure on foreign donors to administer all development and reconstruction aid through Kabul to prevent it from falling into the hands of "warlords". Some Afghan and Western development professionals promoted the idea that the foreign assistance should flow exclusively through central government to support its effectiveness and authority. The implementation of this idea resulted in the bloom of corruption.

The international community mostly perceived Karzai's efforts as reasonable and necessary to build the nation. Some shared the idea that the regional leaders were dangerous "warlords". Others, including some officials in the US government, understood that former Northern Alliance leaders were ultimately allies, but still wanted a more capable Karzai government.

After five years of centralization, Karzai established a sizable administration and was preparing for reelection in 2009, when the US policy substantially changed.

Obama came into office in early 2009 promoting a quick victory in the "good" war in Afghanistan as opposed to the Bush administration's focus on the "wrong" war in Iraq. Although the Obama administration intended to narrow the goal down to the ultimate defeat of Al-Qaeda⁷ [Remarks by the President, 2009], it also admitted the need to scale up both military and non-military efforts to assist Afghanistan. Consequently, Obama was drawn into a broader Afghan policy that found support among those who argued for more foreign troops and money to protect the Afghan central government. The Obama administration did not detect the underlying contradiction between simultaneously narrowing the mission in Afghanistan and supporting more aggressive embrace of centralization.

For the Obama administration, reducing corruption and improving good governance in Afghanistan were critical to enhancing the central government's effectiveness. From the very beginning, the administration was critical of Karzai but had to accept his reelection. The 2009 election in Afghanistan was characterized by high levels of insecurity, mutual accusations and inability to administer the process fairly. Karzai failed to achieve a first-round victory even with backing of some regional leaders. Although he was just shy of 50 percent of the vote, the next two non-Pashtun candidates together received more than 40. Moreover, the fraud was so blatant that his foreign backers publicly demanded that he accept a runoff, which never happened, due to the fears of spreading instability.

As the US and NATO involvement increased and more money poured into reconstruction, development, and training, general frustration with Karzai intensified. In the same way that the

⁷ Prohibited in the Russian Federation.

Bush administration had personalized its Afghan policy around Karzai as the “right” leader, the Obama administration now saw Karzai and his corrupt entourage as the source of the problem.

While the Obama administration’s increase in resources and troops did not achieve its hoped-for impact, the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011 provided an opportunity to start the withdrawal of troops, as Obama had committed to back in 2009. The Obama administration now argued that a reduction in the number of American forces would challenge the Taliban’s primary justification for their insurgency – a significant foreign presence. This policy shift had many consequences; however, it did not alter the effort to build a centralized system in Afghanistan. In fact, it was used to further accelerate the centralization narrative. The view that the central government fortified by a strong army would be able to take control of the country when the Americans left seemed reasonable. With this rationale, the centralization orthodoxy continued undiminished, and the Obama administration increased investment in and training of the Afghan National Army (ANA), which was also accommodating a growing number of Pashtuns to weaken the influence of former Northern Alliance officers and troops.

The Obama administration maintained that Karzai was the problem, never challenging the core notion of centralization. The reason for this was not that centralization was enshrined in the Afghan Constitution but because it had become the conventional wisdom that they could not see beyond. Hence, the US saw the Afghan presidential elections of 2014, in which Karzai was constitutionally barred from running for a third term, as a potential turning point where the centralized state could finally anchor to achieve stability.

The administration believed a successful transfer of power would re-establish political legitimacy after the corruption and dysfunction of Karzai’s presidency. It was believed that the leader transition would bring stability and economic growth cementing the basis for a strong and autonomous Afghanistan. Contrary to these expectations, the presidential elections led the country to the brink of a civil war.

The presidential campaign was tense but initially seemed to buck the trend toward ethnic voting. All the top candidates had vice-presidential running mates who represented the ethnic diversity of the country. The first round did not produce a victory, forcing a runoff between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah. This time, ethnic and tribal identities emerged in full force. Pashtun nationalists lined up behind Ghani and non-Pashtun communities mostly behind Abdullah (although some Uzbeks and Hazaras followed Ghani’s Uzbek and Hazara vice-presidents to support Ghani). The ethnic divisions presented in the runoff continued to grow when both camps mobilized their supporters in the after-election political crisis. Abdullah claimed massive pro-Ghani fraud and refused to admit defeat. The election again exposed the power of identity at the heart of the Afghan political system.

This time the electoral crisis escalated to the point where the intervention of the US secretary of state was required. Still, legal efforts did not resolve the crisis. The unprecedented internationally supervised full audit and partial recount of votes were not enough⁸. Only an American-brokered extra-constitutional agreement concluded in September 2014 averted civil war, dividing executive powers equally between Ghani, who became the president, and Abdullah, for whom a Chief Executive position was established [*Agreement*, 2014].

The power-sharing agreement was characterized not as an ad-hoc deal to overcome temporary political tension but as a beginning of a new political system. The Agreement provided that a constitutional Loya Jirga was to be held within two years to amend the Constitution, converting the position of Chief Executive into that of Prime Minister. However, Ghani and Obama soon

⁸ Intense interrogations on the Afghan election process continue after publication of the outcome of the presidential election by the IEC. [*Summary of Votes*, 2014].

came to see any power redistribution as dangerous and destabilizing and so the agreement was never upheld.

Specifically, Ghani believed that the constitutional reform would fatally weaken his ability to control Afghanistan. He was concerned that the reform would also alienate the historic ruling group, Pashtuns, who disliked power-sharing. Instead, he placed his hopes in a peace treaty with the Taliban. This pivot would enhance his political standing and independence by consolidating Pashtun support while simultaneously diluting the influence of his non-Pashtun allies and coalition partners, who favored reform.

The quick reassertion of ethnonational competition within the government happened because the Obama administration quietly supported Ghani's position on constitutional reform, believing that devolving power from the president would render the Afghan government ineffective and unstable and therefore make troop reduction more difficult. Obama compounded this error by backing Ghani's precipitous peace negotiations with the Taliban without considering the interests and concerns of Ghani's non-Pashtun coalition partners. The administration's reasons for wanting a peace deal with the Taliban were different from Ghani's but no less dangerous nor less short-sighted. It saw a negotiated agreement with the Taliban as crucial for the viability of Afghanistan's central government and therefore essential for America's exit from the country.

In Kabul, this unspoken reversal was seen as a betrayal of the power-sharing agreement. Without American support, Abdullah was too weak to push for the agreed change and had to retreat, putting himself at odds with his non-Pashtun backers. Ghani now had a free hand to implement the Agreement as he needed.

Whether Ghani believed he could consolidate power by replacing his non-Pashtun partners with the Taliban or weaken them by bringing the Taliban into his government, the result was the same. Ghani damaged his own coalition and betrayed the trust of his non-Pashtun partners.

However, the damage was not only political. The Taliban used Ghani's weakness and the start of the US withdrawal to exit from the negotiations while building military strength. With a newly increased number of fighters redeployed in non-Pashtun areas, the Taliban then launched its attacks. Regional leaders and their militias, weakened after years of disarmament, sought to combat the Taliban and ISIS⁹ incursions but received little or no support from Ghani or the United States. At the same time, Afghan Special Forces sustained terrible casualties, and the rest of the ANA proved incapable of fighting.

Ghani did achieve relatively stronger authority by undermining his partners, but this further diminished trust between Afghan politicians. Due to Ghani's efforts, the Taliban forcefully deprived him of any benefit he assumed he would obtain from weakening non-Pashtun regional leaders and successfully negotiating a peace agreement. Instead, his actions exposed the country to escalating insecurity [*Quarterly Report*, 2017].

Although President Trump ran on a platform of reducing the US military and financial commitments abroad and rebuilding America at home, his administration's Afghan policy looked very much like the departing Obama administration's policy. It appeared that Trump's desire to exit the Afghan conflict was opposed by his military and political strategists who saw the Afghan government as too fragile and the Taliban as too powerful. Instead, the Trump administration tried to bring the insurgents to the negotiating table by overwhelming them with military force. This approach, like that of the previous Obama administration, put Ghani at the center of efforts to negotiate with the Taliban and ignored the role and importance of the non-Pashtun communities. The result was predictable: since Ghani believed he had the full support of the Trump administration, he continued his efforts to isolate and weaken his non-Pashtun partners, destabilizing their communities. This provided further opportunities for the Taliban to entrench in

⁹ Prohibited in the Russian Federation.

non-Pashtun areas. It appeared that President Trump's frustration with the results of this policy led to his announcement to withdraw half of the US forces from Afghanistan on 20 December 2018.

In the next years, the security crisis escalated. In the beginning of 2021, Afghanistan's special ops units stopped conducting operations in the provinces. Without the military and transportation assistance of the United States, these units were ambushed and could not be evacuated. Therefore, the elite forces were concentrated in the cities. The Taliban took over territories with ease. With the Taliban advancing, non-Pashtun communities (primarily Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras) started assembling militias. These forces were ready to go to war against the Taliban, at least locally. The Kabul government, however, held them back. Soon, in August 2021, the Kabul government collapsed, the pro-American authorities and their leader Ghani fled.

THE NATURE OF CENTRALIZATION'S DYSFUNCTION

Advocates of centralization tended to explain their lack of success as follows: the right person and adequate resources never were brought together correctly. When Karzai was considered the "right" person, he purportedly never received enough support from the Bush administration, which hesitated to increase the US involvement in Afghanistan. When the Obama administration decided to win the war, committing far more troops and development assistance, Karzai was no longer considered the "right" person. By the time the new "right" person, Ghani, came to power, the Obama administration had already begun downsizing the contingent. Of course, the advocates of centralization also put blame on extraordinary levels of corruption and dysfunction in Afghanistan.

However, the dysfunction of the centralization strategy can be explained not only by the problems of its implementation, but also by the very nature of this strategy. Significant aspects of the policy of centralization produced poor if not exactly opposite results to what it was expected to deliver.

The pejorative term "warlord," often used with particular ethnic groups in mind, by Afghan leaders to describe regional leaders had more to do with ethnonational politics than outsiders were aware. A "warlord" often was a regional leader who had risen to prominence because he had defended his community. One does not have to defend the actions of regional leaders during an ugly civil war to understand that perceptions of security and ethnic identity were and still are more powerfully rooted in the country than an ephemeral notion of national identity and "Afghan brotherhood". The US intervention in 2001 and the consequent push for centralization of authority in Kabul reinforced community consolidation and identity.

In practice, therefore, disarmament was often seen by local communities and leaders as a way to strip them of the means to protect themselves in order to give an advantage to their enemies. The disarmament of local militias engineered by Kabul and its foreign backers left non-Pashtun communities helpless and dependent on the central authority. This engendered significant frustration among those communities and their leaders. A decade after their defeat, the Taliban used this opportunity to improve their position in the field and reassert their anti-government insurgency, reemerging from deep retreat to the surprise of many outsiders. Even with significant foreign support, the Kabul government failed to resist the Taliban, exposing non-Pashtun communities to violence. The central government, though, continued to guard its monopoly.

Another aspect of the "warlord" narrative was the channeling of reconstruction aid through Kabul in order to deprive regional leaders of direct access to resources. Instead of more effective aid, donors witnessed mind-boggling cronyism, favoritism, and incompetence. The problem was worse than the mere inefficiency of the centralized authority. Vast reconstruction, development and military aid were redirected by the Kabul administration to institutionalize its hold on

power. Not only did this have nothing to do with Western aspirations of good governance but tensions among ethnic communities actually greatly increased. Many Afghans believed that these presidents intended to concentrate power not only for political and economic reasons but more strategically to reassert the Pashtun community's historically dominant role.

All this troubled non-Pashtun politicians and fueled serious concerns within their communities. They had experienced how the policy of centralization undermined their security and also deprived them of local assistance, increasing their economic and security dependence on an inefficient and often antagonistic central government. This became a strong incentive for regional politicians to redirect their attention from the management of local problems to political battles in Kabul, thus more intensely injecting ethnonational identities into the power struggle over the central authority.

Afghanistan is a country of minorities, where Pashtuns constitute 35 to 40 percent of the population, Tajiks 25 to 30 percent, Uzbeks and Hazaras 12 to 15 percent each along with five other much smaller ethnic groups – and considerable sub-clans and tribes within every ethnic group¹⁰. Ethnonational and tribal identities are dynamic, not static. They are also highly regional, often with little intermixing outside the limited urban areas. This concentration makes them much more powerful in their respective regions and localities. Although historically the country's inchoate diversity was constrained, repressed or ignored, and its expression was episodic, the last nearly fifty years of insecurity produced ethnonational consolidation and mobilization. Afghanistan's nearly half a century of instability gave birth to expanding awareness and importance of ethnonational identity among its people. The significant foreign military and financial support after the US intervention provided the means to express and defend that identity. This explains in part why coalition building was so unstable and transient.

The centralization committed leaders of every major community to view the presidential elections as a life-or-death struggle for power. This zero-sum view pushed everyone toward conflict, and ultimately instability, as no community could win an absolute majority. Although in such circumstances coalition building would be expected, it was largely tactical and transient or did not occur at all, because each group valued internal cohesion over cooperation.

Each group, therefore, mobilized internal patronage networks and also turned to its foreign backers for support with the promise of alignment while the foreign backers often sought to encourage Afghans to build coalitions for that support. The centralization, seen by foreigners as a way to build governing coalitions, was viewed by Afghans during the American occupation as a way to consolidate, protect, and externally strengthen their community and tribe at the expense of the other groups. The internal competition was only energized by a centralized political system that made the power struggle an all or nothing proposition. Worse, the centralization also pushed communities to seek foreign support, making the situation worse because the foreign backers also were unable to escape the pull of identity and end up aligning with one group against the others.

Even if different Afghan groups reached an accommodation with foreign support, the situation remained unstable as the struggle for a place in the central government turned again into an internal battle for influence and power.

Each president and his circle were initially positioned to use state institutions for their benefit more effectively. But as the president tried to exercise his vast constitutional powers, he met resistance from his coalition partners, who sought to carve out positions to protect their community, not the president's. The president countered this by attempting to weaken his coalition partners, targeting the core of their strength and regional influence and directing as many resources as he could into his own patronage networks. The coalition partners did their best to constrain the

¹⁰ These numbers are widely believed, however, anyone using them needs to admit that they can be off by a significant margin one way or another. The last census took place more than 40 years ago in 1979.

president and get their share of state benefits. A strong president was unacceptable to all the other main players and their communities, provoking further internal group consolidation.

Moreover, the more significant a group's foreign backing was, the more it undermined other leaders and their communities – delaying or undercutting the need for political accommodation required to govern. The winner-take-all system, the essence of centralized authority, in Afghanistan fed conflict and instability as efforts to consolidate and isolate continued in an endless struggle to influence, dominate and control the system of political patronage. No one could win without allying with representatives of other communities, but alliances were mercurial as the centralization promoted a never-ending battle for power at the center.

The theory of centralized authority put effectiveness in conflict with inclusivity, coalition creation in conflict with community consolidation. Foreign advisors and partners wanted an uncomplicated and trouble-free local partner capable of taking quick decisions. However, centralized and superficially efficient decision-making ignored the importance of realistic government execution. This dilemma confounded the three US presidents (Bush, Obama, and Trump), who fought this longest war in the American history.

While the proponents of pro-American central authority in Afghanistan claimed that it was essential for securing the country, there is more ground to argue that the theory of centralization was flawed. It put effectiveness in conflict with inclusivity, coalition creation in conflict with community consolidation. Any endeavors to enforce centralization intensified conflict over authority at the center.

Interestingly, the Taliban, having defeated the pro-American central authority, still maintains the centralization narrative on the basis of Pashtun nationalism. The Taliban's centralization also meets resistance, though weak at the moment. The key variable differentiating the centralization efforts of the Taliban and the one by the previous authority is the foreign military presence.

In the historic perspective, the contemporary Taliban's rule will give an answer to the fundamental question whether Afghanistan's society has evolved in the recent decades into a country of minorities, where the Pashtun claim for the principal role in ruling the country is unrealistic, or the rise of non-Pashtun minorities was mainly a side effect of foreign engagement, without which Pashtuns can reclaim their historic role.

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