Flooding the lake? International democracy promotion and the political economy of the 2014 Presidential Election in Afghanistan

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Abstract

The introductory article to this volume positions the Afghan case within the broader literature on the political economy of war to peace transitions. The paper begins by critiquing the rise of democracy promotion, and then employs a political economy framework to understand the more focused research on democratisation and elections. The paper highlights some of the major features of the Afghan case that provided a backdrop for the 2014 election: a deeply divided society, a highly militarised and invasive international presence, and a history of flawed elections. This discussion helps contextualize the seemingly technical questions about constitutional design, electoral systems, the organisation of elections, and so forth. The concluding section sets out the main themes of the individual contributions that follow.

Keywords: peace transitions, democracy promotion, limited access order, election dynamics, statebuilding, elite bargains.

Introduction

Elections are viewed as an important rite of passage in post conflict societies. It is believed that they both symbolise and help facilitate the transition from violence to politics. Elections signal a new departure, a break with the violent past. They provide a mechanism for managing what had previously been deadly competition, and for legitimising the new political order. A stable long-term peace is thought to depend upon the democratisation of politics, and elections are believed to be an important part of this process, by enabling citizens to chose their leaders and have a stake in the new political dispensation. Peace can thus be 'designed' through the judicious introduction of institutions and processes that create the right incentives for free and fair competition.

These were among the guiding assumptions that underpinned international intervention and statebuilding in post 2001 Afghanistan up until the most recent 2014 presidential election that is the focus of this special issue. All elections are high stakes affairs; they can be understood as 'charismatic moments' in politics[1] that expose competing sets of interests and underlying power structures. This is particularly so in war-affected environments, where political competition can frequently turn violent. In Afghanistan, the 2014 contest boiled down to a run off between Ashraf Ghani, a former World Bank official and Afghan Minister of Finance, and Abdullah Abdullah a former Foreign Minister and prior to this a senior figure in the Jamiat Islami party with roots in the jihadi era. Although Ghani appeared to win the run off, this was contested by Abdullah and his supporters who threatened to violently oppose the result. In the end after heavy international pressure and arbitration, the final results were never released and a compromise deal was arrived at, with a National Unity Government being formed in which Ghani became President and a new position of CEO was created for Abdullah.

This special issue examines the political dynamics surrounding the Afghan elections, drawing upon the broader literature on democratisation and elections in divided, post-war societies. While "post-war" and "divided" are not congruent categories, Afghanistan after 2001 fits both, and in many respects appears as "a most difficult case". Yet studying outliers has a value by helping to crystallise key features that explain how elections interact with and shape the political economy of contested war to peace transitions. The contributors come from different disciplinary and methodological backgrounds, and they interpret and draw conclusions from the evidence in diverging ways. We do not adopt a common position and we often disagree. We believe that this diversity of perspectives is useful as it reflects the contested nature of the field of study, whilst it also helps expose, and bring into conversation with each other, the different sets of arguments and underlying assumptions about the efficacy and desirability of elections in divided societies. One thing that unites the contributors is their long-term and deep engagement with the subject matter; these conversations must be grounded in a fine-grained appreciation of the history and contemporary features of the place where elections are held.

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[1] Grenier, "From Causes to Causers: the Etiology of Salvadoran Internal War Revisited".

Perspectives on elections and the political economy of war to peace transitions

Political theorist Charles Tilly in 'Contention and Democracy in Europe 1650-2000'[2] draws on the metaphors of oil fields, gardens and lakes to explore democracy's characteristics and causal mechanisms. He argues that democracy is unlike an oil field, which can form under only certain conditions over centuries or millennia. Nor is it like a garden, which skilled horticulturalists can bring to life in almost any environment. He concludes that democracy more closely resembles a lake, as lakes are formed in a limited number of contrasting ways, but once in existence share many qualities. The implication of this analogy is that the promoters of democracy should pay careful attention to accumulated historical experience. Democracy cannot be made to just 'grow' anywhere and there is a need to fit interventions to the institutional and cultural context with great care. He warns against the zealous promotion of democracy that ignores history and context; 'flooding rivers do not usually make very stable lakes'.[3]

If we work with these metaphors in the case of Afghanistan, then firstly, the oil field analogy can be quickly discounted; the idea that the country will never be 'ready for' democracy or lacks the unique cultural or political features necessary for democracy to take hold is simply not born out by historical or contemporary experience. Secondly, there is ample evidence of Afghanistan being treated as a 'garden' by democratic horticulturalists, who have paid insufficient attention to history and the underlying preconditions for democratisation—with frequently unintended and negative consequences, as shown below. Thirdly, treating democracy as a lake, drawing upon insights from political economy, has been a much rarer line of inquiry in relation to Afghanistan, yet we believe that it provides a better lens for understanding the dynamics surrounding the 2014 elections and democracy promotion more broadly since 2001. In the first part of this introduction we briefly set out some of the broader

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[2] Tilly, *Contention and Democracy in Europe 1650-2000*.
[3] Tilly, *Contention and Democracy in Europe 1650-2000*, 35.

debates on elections in divided societies, this sets the scene for an overview of democratisation efforts in Afghanistan. We conclude with a summary of the different contributions to the special issue.

The rise and rise of democracy promotion

The democratic peace thesis is based upon the long standing belief that democracy and peace are causally connected—democracies, it is asserted, do not go to war with one another and are more internally stable than non-democracies because they have institutions that can manage contentious politics peaceably. This thesis has been reinvigorated in the post-Cold War period; the decline of civil wars and the apparent emergence of a more peaceable world are celebrated and attributed in part to the spread of democracy and the growth of internationally supported peace operations.[4] Elections, understood here as rule bound competitions over the governance and nature of the state,[5] are seen to be at the heart of this democratisation agenda. Democracy aid has grown from less than $1 billion a year in the 1980s to more than $10 billion today.[6] This assistance has been spent on a combination of elections monitoring, civil society support and rule of law building.

Whilst much of the writing on democratisation is about transitions from authoritarian societies, there is also a growing body of work on the democratising potential of elections in societies emerging from violent conflict. In such contexts, elections and democratisation more broadly are promoted in the belief that they help facilitate a transition from violence to politics. Elections are seen to be central to the legitimation and institutionalisation of power and this typically involves a sequenced set of activities, from negotiations, to peace settlement, to the formation of a transitional authority, and finally elections to signify the transfer of sovereignty and the legitimisation of a new political dispensation. Support for elections is also commonly linked to a wider package of measures that aim to promote statebuilding and good governance. These include constitution making, public sector reforms, civil society promotion, rule of law and human rights support, and public education. This international toolbox for democracy

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[4] Human Security Centre, *Human Security Report 2005: War and Peace in the Twenty First Century*; Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence has Declined*.
[5] Sisk, "Pathways of the Political: Electoral Processes after Civil War", 199.
[6] Carothers, "Democracy Aid at 25: Time to Choose", 1.

promotion is underpinned by a utilitarian understanding of legitimacy i.e. legitimacy is
bound up with the ability of the state to deliver key public goods including security,
justice and basic services.

Critiques of post war democracy promotion

Whilst few dispute the inherent desirability of democracy as an end point, getting there
is typically conflictual.[7] Furthermore there has been a growing critique of externally
promoted democratisation,[8] and a related decline in western commitment to democracy
aid, linked in part to the damaged status of western democracy, a growing push back
from those on the receiving end and rising competition from non-democracies.[9]

Elections as an instrument in post-war democratisation have been criticised as a
fundamentally flawed strategy. As a highly competitive institution, elections are likely to
reinforce rather than heal wartime divisions unless solid political institutions such as
political parties and rules of the game are established.[10] Recent research likewise
concludes on a cautious note: elections at most set the stage for 'democratic learning'
and thus have a democratising potential in the long run.[11]

If political transitions are primarily about the restoration (or creation) of legitimate
political authority, this suggests a need to focus attention on the 'vernacular' of local
politics and how notions of legitimacy are coded and gain meaning in particular
contexts.[12] This perspective is reinforced by political economy writing, which shows
that, historically, processes of legitimation were the product, not of abstract and
universal principles, but extended and violent struggles between rulers and
populations. Whilst legitimacy may be cloaked in formal, legal-rational principles, it
remains inseparable from underlying power relations and material interests,
underpinned by access to the means of violence.

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[7] Hegre et al., "Toward a Democratic Civil Peace? Democracy, Political Change, and Civil War, 1816-1992",
[8] Suhrke, *When More is Less: The International project in Afghanistan*.
[9] Carothers, "Democracy Aid at 25: Time to Choose".
[10] Paris, *At War's End: Building peace after Civil Conflict*.
[11] Teorell and Hadenius, "Elections as Levers of Democracy: A Global Inquiry", 100.
[12] de Waal, "Mission without End? Peacekeeping in the African Political Marketplace".

Yet democracy promotion is closely tied to a set of ideal type Weberian assumptions, which rarely hold in divided societies (or most late developing countries). These assumptions include; the state is a unitary actor which commands a monopoly over the means of violence; the existence of a clear separation between state and society; legitimacy that is based on rational legal mechanisms, including the rule of law, representation through free and fair elections and the provision of public goods including security and public welfare and services.

It is assumed that if these qualities do not exist in divided, post-war states and societies, then with externally promoted 'capacity building' they can be created. Ultimately these societies can become what Douglas North et al. call 'Open Access Orders' (OAOs),[13] in which there is open political and economic competition and perpetually lived organisations that are independent of the lives of their members. In OAOs, control of the political system is open to entry by any group and contested through prescribed and typically formal constitutional means.

However, North et al. argue that OAOs are not the equilibrium model and most developing countries, and particularly those emerging from war, operate according to the logic of what they call the 'limited access order' (LOA). In contexts where the means of coercion are diffuse, society organises itself to control violence amongst its elite factions. Political elites divide up control of the economy with each getting a share of the rents, and political coalitions emerge in order to manage and restrict access to rents. Since violence would disrupt these rent sharing agreements, elites have an incentive to maintain political order. From this perspective, elites respond in perfectly rational ways to their environment. This is very different from the idea that poor governance can be attributed to greedy self-interested individuals, and can be addressed by weeding out the 'bad apples'.

A related concept is de Waal's notion of the 'political marketplace',[14] which also highlights the relationship between violence, order and material interests in divided societies. In this framework, politics is seen as analogous to a market place, in which

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[13] North et al., *Violence and Social orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History*.

[14] de Waal, "Mission without End? Peacekeeping in the African Political Marketplace".

central and peripheral elites are in the business of buying and selling loyalty.
International interventions can disrupt or distort the market place, for example by
funding central state elites they artificially lower the costs of buying the loyalty of
peripheral elites. Conversely by working around the state and directly with local elites,
they inflate the costs of buying loyalty. The volatility of the market place is accentuated
by the fact that loyalty is monetised and no longer based on older more stable patron-
client kinship relations, and also because political elites operate within networks that
span international borders.

Political economy analyses of this kind usefully de-construct and denaturalise the idea
of the Weberian state, blurring the binary distinctions between state and non-state,
legitimate and illegitimate and highlighting the networks, coalitions and material
foundations that underpin or undermine the state.

How specifically do these insights help us understand the political economy of elections
and the mobilisation of legitimacy in divided, post-war societies? First, in contexts of
exogenous statebuilding, external military and financial support underpin and
effectively perform the core functions of statehood, including managing violence,
providing services and running elections. In practice, sovereignty is a fiction, since the
state cannot exist without external life support. Extreme extroversion shapes elite
politics and has major ramifications for how legitimacy is mobilised and maintained.
Since the main sources of finance are external, rather than domestically generated
taxation, control of the key interfaces between the international and domestic arenas is
the key to political leadership. As a consequence state leaders frequently suffer from a
dual legitimacy problem. They cannot survive and dispense largess without satisfying
the demands of their international patrons. At the same time they must generate a
domestic support base and politico-military backers if they are to ward off challengers
to their rule. Too much dependence on the former may undermine their perceived
legitimacy with the latter, whilst being too embedded in local patronage structures may
undermine their legitimacy with the former. Potentially this legitimacy deficit can be
compensated through utilitarian legitimacy, or the capacity of the state to deliver valued
resources to its citizens. One problem with this, is that the elites of rentier states have
stronger incentives to respond upwards to their international patrons than downwards

to societal groups, and whilst provision of services and good governance may be on the international agenda, donors typically have multiple and conflicting interests.

Second, legitimacy in LAOs may be defined less in terms of formal elections and modes of representation, than the ability to provide protection and security by managing violence. In Afghanistan, the mobilisation of political support is closely linked to military legitimacy—a form of charismatic authority based upon a track record of 'successful' violent entrepreneurship.[15] Military legitimacy is also closely connected to the ability to mobilise and provide economic resources and in some cases welfare provision as well. Non- state forms of authority frequently emerge in wartime and perform state-like roles, including collecting taxes and providing public goods such as legal arbitration, business promotion and social welfare. [16]

Third, in divided societies, by definition there are competing sources of legitimacy, which may have little to do with formal state authority. In fact there is a long tradition in Afghan society of seeing the state as the outsider and illegitimate. The legitimacy of local notables has been linked to their ability to keep the state at bay—to create a metaphorical 'mud wall' to keep the enumerators and tax collectors out, or at least to negotiate the terms of extraction (Dupree, 2002).[17] Tribal, ethnic and religious forms of authority were always significant, hence the persistent efforts of the Afghan state to co-opt these legitimating institutions. This is not to argue that legitimacy rests upon, and is embedded within, authentic and unchanging Afghan traditions. There has been a sedimentation of new institutions on top of old ones, and Afghan social and political structures have been profoundly changed by the conflict, including a growing demand for more state not less.[18] Yet the fact that the Taliban invested in courts and conflict resolution mechanisms shows that other forms of legitimacy may be seen as more important than formal procedural democracy.

Whilst North et al. and de Waal's frameworks provide a useful corrective to liberal perspectives on democratisation, the notion that politics and by extension, legitimacy,

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[15] Giustozzi, *The Art of Coercion: The Primitive Accumulation and Management of Coercive Power*.
[16] Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life During War*; Raeymaekers, "Protection for Sale? War and the Transformation of Regulation on the Congo-Ugandan Border".
[17] Dupree, *Afghanistan.*
[18] Hakimi, "Getting Savages to Fight Barbarians: Counterinsurgency and Local militias in Afghanistan".

can be reduced to the rational calculation of material interests and the buying and selling of loyalty between political elites is reductionist in the extreme. This misses some of the important dimensions of 'the political', particularly in divided societies like Afghanistan. Both the liberal idea that legitimacy is derived from abstract principles, or the notion that politics is purely the result of material calculation—a kind of politics without values—fails to capture the complexity and historically contingent nature of political mobilisation. Political subjectivities are shaped as much by ideas, norms and collective feelings of belonging as by individual interests. People's behaviour cannot be explained only by rational choice—they frequently act against their immediate interests and friendship, self-sacrifice, collective bonds, shame and coercion all play a role in shaping political subjectivities and behaviour in conflict.[19]

These insights all help us to address a key question: do elections in war-torn societies reinforce the divisions of past violence, or can they play a role in transforming them and, in so doing, move society towards the trajectory of open access orders?

A political economy perspective suggests war to peace transitions rarely bring about a complete break with the past. More often they are about the reproduction rather than the transformation of wartime dynamics. Wartime elites are frequently absorbed into the new dispensation, and indeed this may be a precondition for 'peace'. Violence may continue, mutate or intensify.[20] Therefore the binary division between war and peace, violence and politics, obscures a more complex reality in which war economies mutate into criminalised peace economies; far from experiencing a peace dividend, post- war societies may experience ongoing violence and extreme vulnerability. Elections, in this case, become another instrument of power available to contesting wartime elites, or are captured by new elites arising from the peace agreement.

Not all elections have these kinds of perverse effects, depending on the nature of the case, and there are mitigating strategies. The latter include delaying elections and developing the requisite institutional capacities—for example building strong political

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[19] Cramer, *Civil War is Not a Stupid Thing: Accounting for Violence in Developing Countries*; Gutierrez-Sanin, "Telling the Difference: Guerrillas and Paramilitaries in the Colombian War"; Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*; Spencer, *Anthropology, Politics and the State: Democracy and Violence in South Asia*; Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*.
[20] Suhrke and Berdal, *The Peace in Between: Post-War Violence and Peacebuilding*.

parties, a free media and civil society organisations—prior to holding them. Roland
Paris calls this institutionalisation before liberalisation.[21] Moreover, stakes can be
lowered, by choosing election systems that are more accommodationist and encourage
inclusive political coalitions, rather than a more centralist winner-takes-all system.

The political economy of Afghanistan's 'post war' transition

It follows from the above arguments, that the starting point for understanding the
impact of elections in post-war societies must be the political economy prevailing at the
time of the peace settlement. Space does not permit an extensive mapping of the
political and economic landscape of Afghanistan in 2001, but a number of points can be
highlighted:

First, Afghanistan was always likely to be a 'difficult case' given the history of a weak
rentier state and more than thirty years of war, a period of state collapse, a fractured
political elite, the diffusion of the means of violence, ethnic divisions, regional meddling
and a regionalised war economy fueled by illicit commodities.

Second, in spite of UN Special Representative Lakhdar Brahimi's promise to maintain a
light international footprint, the international presence became over time very heavy
and increasingly militarised . This brought into sharp relief contradictions between the
declared goals of promoting democratisation, domestic ownership and sovereignty, and
the reality of a state that was almost entirely propped up through foreign aid and
military support.

Third, international engagement was characterised by shifting and sometimes
contradictory goals. The original rationale for intervention was the US-led 'war on
terror'. Over time statebuilding, good governance and democratisation became more
significant and as much as one billion dollars was spent on holding elections over three
electoral cycles. But as the insurgency grew there was a growing scepticism towards
statebuilding and democratisation. The narrative shifted towards 'security first', 'good
enough' governance, and bottom-up statebuilding. The counterinsurgency strategy,

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[21] Paris, *At War's End: Building peace after Civil Conflict*.

which involved funding militias and working with tribal structures outside the state, worked directly at odds with the declared goal of statebuilding and good governance.[22]

Fourth, the Bonn Agreement of December 2001 shaped a 'post-war' order that barely reflected existing power relations. It was dominated by groups linked to a faction within the Shura-e Nazar, it excluded the Taliban and failed to address the concerns of Pakistan. As Suhrke[23] argues, the result of this externally imposed and exclusive political settlement was a 'divided peace'.

Fifth, the political and institutional choices made after Bonn, arguably diminished the potential for a democratic transition. Initially, technocrats, jihadis and royalists, each mobilising different sources of legitimacy and sponsors, jockeyed for position in the new transitional administration. Ultimately, as Rubin argues, the political transition involved a process of 'warlord democratisation' in which the jihadi-era politico-military networks were folded into the new transitional government. The state became the main arena of material accumulation and key ministries were treated as positional goods that were divvied up between the different factions. The state that emerged in the shadow of this spoils politics can be characterised as a 'rhizome state'[24]—in which the formal institutions were underpinned by informal networks and power structures.

The formal structures constituted a democratic façade, whilst real power lay with the politico-military networks that dominated the administration at the central, provincial and district levels. The principles of good governance, including transparency and accountability did not offer a credible solution to the challenges faced by ruling elites, these—in the logic described by North et al.—being the need to contain violence, mobilise resources and manage patronage networks. Technocrats found themselves increasingly marginalised and disadvantaged compared to rivals that 'got things done' through informal, patronage-based networks. The disjuncture between façade and underlying reality was accentuated by an extremely centralised presidential system that stood in contrast to the decentralised and fragmented political landscape.

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[22] Goodhand and Hakimi, "Counterinsurgency, Local militias, and Statebuilding in Afghanistan".
[23] Suhrke, "Waging War and Building Peace in Afghanistan".
[24] Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*.

Sixth, where the political and economic spheres are out of line with each other, violence and instability are likely. The centripetal thrust of the formal agenda of statebuilding/state consolidation was countered by the centrifugal forces of decentralised violence and a regionalised political economy based on the control of trade and illicit drugs. International military and donor assistance often oscillated between funding the central state, whilst contributing to centrifugal tendencies through off- budget programmes and funding flows. Given the highly extroverted economy, elite modes and patterns of capital accumulation created a cushion against domestic pressures and worked against efforts to institutionalise and democratise power.

Seventh, these tensions are accentuated by the fact that Afghanistan is clearly not a post-war context. The insurgency has grown year on year, both in its geographical spread and intensity. It is difficult to think of any country where there have been successful efforts to simultaneously build and democratise the state whilst it faces an existential threat from an armed insurgency. The legacy of conflict and the difficult regional context must be recognised, but the deeply divided peace was also linked to the early sins of omission and commission by international actors, which arguably foreclosed the possibility of a domestically led and negotiated political transition.[25] As noted earlier, Afghanistan clearly represents a 'most difficult' case in relation to democratisation.

Post 2001 statebuilding and the context of democratisation

Institutions can themselves be understood as 'peace settlements'; they are the product of often violent conflicts and power battles. They are understood as the rules of the game, and the rules are set by the most powerful in society. Institutional choices are never only technical questions; they are ineluctably political, and the choices made in Afghanistan unsurprisingly reflected the interests of dominant players. A central choice in post-war societies is drawing up the Constitution, which partly reflects and partly establishes the new rules of the game.

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[25] Goodhand and Sedra, "Rethinking Liberal Peacebuilding, Statebuilding and Transition in Afghanistan: an Introduction"; Suhrke, *When More is Less. The International project in Afghanistan*; Gopal, *No Good Men among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War through Afghan Eyes*.

The literature on constitutional design broadly identifies two positions. First, the integrationist position argues for strong centralised state institutions in order to override or contain centrifugal tendencies in society. Second, the accommodationist position argues for the need for political institutions and legal systems to reflect and adapt to the reality of divided societies; rather than trying to contain divisions in society, it is necessary to work with them and use them as the building blocks for the new power structures. The latter approach advocates power-sharing arrangements involving some form of consociationalism. There are nuances within these two positions, with some advocating a combination of the two, starting with the former and then moving towards the latter. Afghanistan, by contrast, started with an integrationist position and following several rounds of flawed elections—in which a winner takes all system created incentives for massive rigging and corruption— moved towards a more accommodationist framework, as explored further below.

The Constitution promulgated after 2001 was patterned on the 1964 Constitution of Zahir Shah, which was a relatively liberal document.[26] The social and political context, however, was less conducive to democratisation than had been the case in pre-war Afghanistan. The transitional arrangements that emerged from Bonn led to a streamlined authority with powers concentrated in the president's office, an election system (SNTV) that weakened the emergence of political parties and the role of the Parliament. With foreign funding underwriting a very large portion of the state expenditure, the Parliament at any rate became marginalised.

This centralised political system was supported by the US and a largely Pashtun coalition of technocrats and modernisers. Karzai's position was legitimised and strengthened by the 2004 presidential elections. The 2005 parliamentary elections were more problematic and in the eyes of many were delegitimised by the inclusion of military commanders. A level of confidence amongst external observers and much of the Afghan population about the overall trajectory of the political transition was from then on undermined by two inter-related trends. Karzai, for various reasons, increasingly drew upon and reinvigorated patron-client networks. In parallel, technocrats were marginalised or left the administration, and their efforts to institutionalise and

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[26] Suhrke, *When More is Less: The International project in Afghanistan*.

bureaucratise power began to unravel. Second, the rise of the neo-Taliban and an
escalating internationalized civil war   lent urgency to this de-institutionalisation
dynamic, further undermining the political transition.

Renewed war transformed the statebuilding and democratisation agenda in several
ways. Instability led to a retraction of the state presence in the countryside and an
inability to deliver core services, which undermined its legitimacy. Insecurity directly
affected the conduct of elections, most obviously by denying a major part of the
population, primarily the Pashtuns, their right to vote. At the same time, international
donors were reluctant to open the Pandora's Box of electoral reforms to address the
widely recognised problems of voter registration, electoral fraud and oversight.[27] A
growing and increasingly kinetic foreign military presence further undermined the
popularity of the government. The insurgency also shifted the strategic calculation of
international actors—with the state under threat, the priority shifted away from
democratization and statebuilding towards stabilisation and counterinsurgency. The
2009 presidential elections brought out these trends in sharp relief; they highlighted
the limitations of a winner takes all system in a divided society, which generated
massive incentives for fraud and conflict. In the end a violent confrontation was
avoided, thanks in part to the intervention of US Democratic Senator John Kerry, and
Karzai emerged as the winner, but with his legitimacy seriously damaged.

The dynamics surrounding elections must be interpreted in light of this development.
two trends: Elections combined with the growing insurgency to create opportunities
for politico-military networks to reinsert themselves into Afghanistan's formal power
structures.   Whatever technical assistance or capacity was built, organisations like the
Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan (IEC) were still governed by a political
superstructure operating in a fragmented political environment.

Election Dynamics

At one level, elections can be seen as a widely accepted technology for selecting and
legitimising a new leadership in post-war societies. Drawing on Tilly's metaphor, what
matters is skilled 'gardening'. At another level, viewed through a political economy lens,

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[27] Suhrke, *When More is Less: The International project in Afghanistan*, 179.

what matters are structural conditions, or the oil field metaphor in Tilly's scheme. Here, elections are understood as an arena of intense competition between politico-military elites over access to rents, resources and positions; they are less about formal legitimacy than material resources, power and the political coalitions that emerge from such processes. In this perspective, the elections are themselves less important than the resulting division of rents, resources and positions that reflect the overarching political settlement. A third more anthropological or cultural perspective is that elections can be understood as highly choreographed exercises that target and communicate particular messages to internal and external audiences. In this sense elections are performative. They may be less about the content or the result, than the extent to which they reassure and convince certain audiences (including western electorates as well as Afghan voters) of the legitimacy of the exercise. The key issue from this perspective is therefore one of perceived legitimacy, and whether elections are symbolically convincing.

We briefly explore some of the analytical and policy implications of each perspective in relation to the 2014 presidential elections.

The technology of elections; democracy as 'gardening'

To a large extent this has been the dominant perspective in the policy-oriented literature. The focus has been on the strategic design of the electoral system and the conduct of elections, with the underlying aim being to create a political system that more closely resembles an open access order.

Experience from Afghanistan suggests that early strategic choices have a disproportionate effect on the trajectory of the political transition. There is a high level of path dependence, as the initial choices are difficult to reverse, and narrow the options for future reforms. This is because vested interests develop around maintaining a system that incumbents benefited from. Therefore, a highly centralised presidential system, which encouraged a winner-takes-all approach and a voting system that prevented the emergence of coherent political parties, were retained through three rounds of elections in spite of international advice and domestic mobilisation for reforms to the system. In the end an existential crisis caused by the dual threats of the insurgency and the potential for a violent contestation of power within the ruling elite,

led to an agreement to re-negotiate the rules of the game in the form of a commitment to move towards a more accommodationist political system.

The 2014 election thus revealed the limits of technical support or 'gardening'. In a low capacity regime,[28] highly dependent on external resources, technical support produced a weak democratic façade. Domestic and international players simply circumvented or instrumentalised the system, when the stakes were raised. Rather than deciding who rules, elections tended to confirm the existing structure of power; in the case of 2004 they played a role in legitimising power, but by 2009 and 2014 they had the obverse effect.

Drawing on Tilly's gardening analogy, many democracy advocates believe that the dysfunctionalities identified above can be addressed through better techniques and more systematic weeding out the 'bad apples' . However, this view fails to appreciate that there is a deeper underlying logic to elite behaviour in situations of endemic insecurity. This takes us to a political economy analysis.

The political economy of elections: forging elite bargains

Where the political settlement is out of line with economic and coercive power, violent conflict is likely in order to 'renegotiate' access to rents. Elections are likely to de-stabilise political coalitions, and regular elections shorten the time frames of elites and the life cycles of elite settlements. The likely result is increased volatility as elites are unwilling to credibly commit to political settlements and therefore constantly 'hedge'. Whereas in mature democracies the whole point of elections is to inject uncertainty into the political system—to maintain open competition and to ensure that political elites are responsive to their electorates—in certain post-war contexts, they create perverse incentives for elites to only make political and economic investments in the short term.

As well as influencing the time frames of elites, elections shape mobilisation dynamics. First, they run the risk of reinforcing identity boundaries. In contexts where political parties are weak or nascent and there are few cross-cutting horizontal ties between

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[28] Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence*.

groups (bridging social capital), political entrepreneurs are likely to draw upon identity based networks (bonding social capital) to mobilise voters.

Second, elections generate a strong centrifugal dynamic because central state elites depend upon peripheral elites to mobilise and 'deliver' vote banks. In the run up to elections there is 'hyperinflation' in the price of loyalty, as central state actors are forced to broker deals with peripheral elites, who are in a very strong bargaining position at that point in time. The post-election period may also be a time of great instability, frequently involving a precipitous decline in the price of loyalty as central state elites renege on, or attempt to renegotiate their election time promises.

All these tendencies were evident in the recent elections in Afghanistan. They converged in 2014 to create a crisis that was only 'solved' by disregarding the election results—which at any rate were contested and probably fraudulent—and recognizing the logic of inter-elite bargaining through a power-sharing agreement.

Where the means of violence are diffuse, the potential for competition to turn violent is always high. In Afghanistan violence has in a sense been 'democratised'; 'violence rights' are commanded by a plethora of foreign and domestic armed groups including state, quasi-state and non-state/societal actors. This violence potential applies not only to the major fault lines of the conflict, as demonstrated in the 2014 elections when the threat of violence was a decisive factor behind the power-sharing agreement. Elections can also generate micro-level conflicts. For example Ibrahimi (this volume) shows how the Ghani-Abdullah standoff catalysed other forms of conflict including long standing competition between Hazaras and Kuchis over access to land.

In addition to the de-stabilising effects of elections, the economic costs are huge. Apart from the vast sums of money committed to holding elections by international donors, less visible and more difficult to capture in monetary terms are the pre and post-election deals that have to be made by political elites; first to buy support, mostly financed by revenues from the illicit economy, and then in the post-election period when office holders have to recoup their investments through informal taxation and predation.

Where, as in Afghanistan, competition in the economic and political spheres is structured, indeed over-determined by the legacies of war, gaining office through elections depends upon access to the means of violence and patronage. Paradoxically then elections tend to further embed at the heart of government the patronage networks of politico-military groups. Rather than disrupting corruption, elections run the risk of further institutionalising it.

The theatre of elections: performing democracy

Elections are highly choreographed and scripted performances; they generate and are shaped by a particular 'affective economy' as well as a political economy. Ashraf Ghani's makeover is illustrative of how elections can be seen as dramas of identity and difference.[29] Casting off his previous garb as a World Bank technocrat, Ghani donned a shalwar kameez and turban, brushed up his rusty Pashtu, grew a beard, cultivated tribal leaders and even Afghanised the name of his Egyptian-born wife. He was very open about this image change: "What I learned was to speak the language of my country. Get out of my technocratic skin and speak like my grandfather, who was an influential man, a general, but really a man of the people.... I'm re-rooted firmly in the soil of this country," he added. "Nobody can look and say, 'Oh, there goes a Johns Hopkins professor.' What they say is, 'There goes a man of the people.'"

Elections are therefore more than simply technical exercises or smoke screens for the pursuit of rational interests; they are rituals of participation and legitimation. And it is more complex than the idea that   rituals mask the underlying reality of politics proper.[30] The performance of elections becomes a crucial site for the production and reproduction of the political.[31] For example the internal debates within the Taliban (Giustozzi, this volume) about whether to engage with the presidential elections show that they cannot be dismissed as empty rituals—they are appropriated by local actors and in the process acquire new significance and meanings.

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[29] Spencer, *Anthropology, Politics and the State: Democracy and Violence in South Asia*.
[30] Spencer, *Anthropology, Politics and the State: Democracy and Violence in South Asia*, 77.
[31] Spencer, *Anthropology, Politics and the State: Democracy and Violence in South Asia*, 78.

Khilnani writing about democracy in India notes that "democracy as a manner of seeing and acting in the world is changing the relation of Indians to themselves".[32] Whilst it would perhaps be an exaggeration to state that the democratic idea has fully penetrated the Afghan political imagination, as Khilnani argues in relation to India, it is clear that Afghans have been changed by the experience of three rounds of elections. However, the extent of this change is largely unknown, because we know so little about the 'Afghan voter'—particularly in rural areas where most of the population lives—beyond highly unreliable public opinion polls. More anthropologically oriented accounts including the contributions by Coburn and Ibrahimi in this volume show that how people vote is linked partly to patronage networks, but also to particular histories and narratives of exclusion and grievances that date back to the wartime and beyond.

At this point, what can we conclude about the role of elections in the project of democratizing Afghanistan? Going back to Tilly's metaphors described at the outset, we hold fast to the idea that the lake—rather than the oilfield or the garden – combines elements of structure and agency that are intellectually most appealing and best suited for understanding the democratizing project as a whole. As a particular instrument of this project, elections have in Afghanistan after 2001 had increasingly dysfunctional and undemocratic effects. They have not been interventions carefully tailored to fit the institutional landscape and its underlying political economy, thus reinforcing rather than transforming social divisions and attendant patronage networks. At the same time, the elections have visibly stimulated the production and reproduction of political awareness and behaviour – forces that can be harnessed in a democratic direction. As several of the articles in this volume argue, the elections have expressed and possibly further strengthened popular demands for a political order marked by greater representation, accountability and transparency. As such, they may well have contributed to what Teorell and Hadenius call 'democratic learning'.[33]

Summary of the contributions

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[32] Khilnani, *The Idea of India*, 17.
[33] Teorell and Hadenius, "Elections as Levers of Democracy: A Global Inquiry", 100.

The articles that follow address a range of questions raised by the 2014 election. We cast the net wide to catch a variety of substantive issues as well as analytical perspectives.

Scott Smith starts with the previous presidential election in 2009, which he observed as an official in the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). As an assistant to the head of the mission, Kai Eide, Smith witnessed at close hand the conflict that divided the broader diplomatic and aid community over its proper role in democracy promotion in Afghanistan—intrusive and proactive to maintain international standards of fairness *vs* a contextualised approach of restraint and caution. The dilemmas inherent in international democracy promotion were exposed even more starkly during the 2014 elections, as Smith shows. Threats of violence, accusations of fraud, and fear of a breakdown of the political order led the Obama Administration to broker an agreement that in effect nullified the results of the electoral process.

Smith opens his analysis by laying out the case for rigorously upholding standards, but then moves towards a more cautious position. "This is not an argument to jettison democracy promotion, but to look more closely at elections and democracy as a means by which broken societies can truly govern themselves, not simply govern themselves in the precise way we would wish them to govern themselves." As to any healing or stabilising function that elections might have on society, Smith refers to a conversation with two of his Afghan friends. As they reflect on the role of electoral democracy in contemporary Afghanistan, one compares it to "Dracula, continually rising from the dead but sucking the blood out of the country," the other finds it "more like Frankenstein, a monster created in a lab that had gotten destructively out of control." These are not, metaphors of consolidation, Smith concludes.

William Byrd examines the tension between democratic elections and inter-elite political bargaining as contrasting approaches to establish the necessary political consensus for rule-making, governing and regulating social conflict. Using the framework of Douglass North and associates on limited versus open access orders, Byrd points to the poor fit between elections, as the principal instrument for regulating political conflict in democratic (open access) orders, and the reality of Afghanistan's

"limited access order". The approach builds on earlier literature, which points to the dangers of early elections in post-conflict societies and, more generally, the disruptive potential of competitive elections in deeply divided societies.

In Afghanistan, Byrd argues, access to political power and economic rents is determined through bargaining among mostly armed elites. When bargains are reached, relative peace prevails, but the threat of violence is ever-present because bargaining is not regulated by formal legal structures, there is no official agent to mediate the outcome, and the participants can reasonably fear that the loser will not get a fair go a second time around. In North's nomenclature, Afghanistan is a "*fragile* limited access order". Introducing elections in such a situation creates a profound mismatch between the structures of power in society and the formal process of allocating power. This time, the US prevented probable outbreaks of violence by forging a settlement based on bargaining that set aside the electoral results, which were not even publicly announced. The process discredited elections and thereby political democracy as a mode of governance, Byrd concludes. As analysts in the earlier literature on elections in divided societies, he calls for long-term institutional development to rectify the situation. Development of programmatic political parties is particularly important. Parties can widen the access to power and, through participation in regular elections, lower the stakes and temperature in particular elections insofar as the loser at one time will have a fair chance the next time around. Byrd makes a sharp distinction between "the people" and "the elites", similar to the analysis by Susanne Schmeidl in another article in this issue. To conclude that the Afghan people are not ready for democracy is erroneous. "Such a conclusion would do gross disservice to the millions of Afghans who voted in good faith" and others who worked to make the election possible.

Noah Coburn takes us to the district of Qara Bagh just north of Kabul, where he did field work during the 2009, 2010 and 2014 elections. In a finely grained ethnographic analysis, Coburn examines the way elections were manipulated by local elites, providing access to resources and influence to those already well position in the power structure, such as "Anwar Khan", a former *jihadi* commander turned local politician. Drawing on comparative work by Staffan Lindberg and others who ask to what extent, and how, elections might promote democratisation, Coburn finds that in Qara Bagh elections had

the opposite effect. Elections were instrumentalised and captured by local political elites, who expertly operated in an internationalised political economy. Close to Kabul and located astride the main road to the huge Bagram military base, Qara Bagh was well positioned to receive a large inflow of foreign funds from civilian aid projects and military contracts. Well-positioned local actors accessed these resources to fuel patronage networks and wield influence, including during election time. In the short run, at least, elections thus served to consolidate existing power hierarchies.

Antonio Giustozzi examines the attitudes and actions of various Taliban factions towards the 2014 elections. Unlike during previous elections, there was considerable discussion within the movement over how to respond. A few networks decided to oppose the elections with force, but the most striking feature of the Taliban response was the pragmatic approach adopted in the end by most networks. They decided, in effect, to operate within the logic of elections by influencing the vote in favour their preferred candidate. The methods were decidedly undemocratic, such as buying up voting cards and blocking "bad" villages from voting. All three Taliban *shura* had communication channels with elders in Pashtun communities to discuss election strategies and ways to influence the vote. Giustozzi concludes that in the second round of voting, most Taliban leaders favoured Ghani's presidency not primarily on ethnic grounds, but because he was considered more likely than Abdullah to negotiate with them on favourable terms. Mullah Mansour, the Taliban leader who in 2015 was declared Mullah Omar's successor, apparently at the time shared this pragmatic view and reportedly had in 2013 met with then President Karzai to discuss the forthcoming elections.

Susanne Schmeidl draws on her personal experience working with civil society in Afghanistan to observe elections and promote civic education. She shows how key, early electoral experiences were manipulated by a coalition of national and international elites to serve narrow interests of power and short-term stabilisation. This was particularly obvious during the emergency *loya jirga* in 2002 and the 2004 election to the constitutional *jirga* that approved the new constitution. The democratic potential inherent in the process of drafting the 2004 constitution was recognised in the design of plans for a broad process of popular consultations, but was cut short by the UN, the

international donors, and the incumbent Afghan political elites, who all wanted a briefer and more managed process.

Schmeidl situates her narrative in a broader analysis of democratisation, arguing that neither history nor religion represent structural obstacles to democratisation in Afghanistan. The *vox populi*—as expressed in surveys and heard through local qualitative research—pronounces in favor of the values of representation and accountability associated with liberal political democracy. The obstacles lie in the strength of the existing power hierarchy and its transnational character.

Anna Larson takes a close look at the workings of the Lower House of the Afghan Parliament (*Wolesi Jirga*), drawing on close observations and interviews with many of the key participants during her time in Kabul where she worked as an independent researcher and with AREU. Larson discusses what she sees as principal and deeply problematic characteristics of the present Parliament: a penchant for strategic ambiguity (which reduces accountability), lack of complete record-taking and often unorthodox decision-making procedures (which reduces transparency), emphasis on advocacy rather than legislation, and—on the part of the international community—a tendency to focus on technicalities of assistance, combined with heavy-handed attempts to influence what is deemed undesirable legislation.

These tendencies are discussed with reference to two important cases of legislation affecting women's rights. The law on Elimination of All Violence against Women (EVAW) is a land mark bill decreed into law by Karzai in 2009, but it met with so much resistance that efforts to have it formally approved by Parliament were abandoned. (It still exists as a body of law, according to the Constitution). The second case examined is the parliamentary process around reform of the Electoral Law that passed the Lower House in 2013, but had included a proposal to reduce the quota for women in provincial and district councils. Effective opposition tactics by women MPs succeeded in defeating the proposal.. Both cases show the obstacles to legislate rights for women. More broadly, Larson argues, instead of providing a counterweight to the executive in Afghanistan's strong presidential system, the Parliament serves as a vehicle for elites to control processes that in principle should promote democratisation.

Timor Sharan and Srinjoy Bose explore how political-networks are constituted and used to access state power at the central level. They demonstrate that networks, rather than political parties and formal interest groups, are the principal mode of political organisation in Afghanistan. Flexible, shifting and unstable, the networks are non-hierarchical though headed by high profile and charismatic leaders. The authors draw on primary data collected through extended fieldwork to map the identities and political economy of the major networks that had formed towards the end of the 2000s and were joined to the inner circles of the National Unity Government established after the 2014 election.

Sharan and Bose examine negotiations over the appointment of the cabinet ministers, governors, advisers and staff, and find that staff positions around the two leading actors—Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah—are heavily ethnicised. This feature, and the general prominence of informal political networks in the inner workings of the political system, raises fundamental questions regarding the prospects for reform and state stability, they argue. The current leaders must accommodate competing elite forces and manage their networks to consolidate their own position. On the other hand, genuine reforms entail a progressive shift of the sources of state legitimacy away from management of political networks to good governance and service delivery that address people's concerns, including widespread popular anger over the corrupt practices of network elites. Balancing these contradictory forces constitute a basic dilemma for President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah.

Niamatullah Ibrahimi explores the meaning and function of political communication with respect to ethnic identity in the 2014 election, with special reference to Afghanistan's Hazara population. The two main presidential candidates put Hazara leaders on their electoral ticket in order to attract "the Hazara vote". Yet despite equal representation of Hazara elites in the two camps, the Hazaras voted overwhelmingly for Abdullah during both rounds of the election. To explain this apparent puzzle, Ibrahimi uses framing analysis to examine the political messages of the two camps. He finds that Ghani's broad historical narrative reinforced ethno-cultural collective memories of discrimination and subjugation among the Hazara; these memories also seemed to confirm and make sense of recent repeated cases of violent conflict between Pashtun

nomads and Hazaras in which the latter saw themselves as the victim. Thus, in terms of communication as both "a field- of-meaning" and as a "sense-making device", the Ghani campaign failed to reach most of the Hazaras.

William Maley and Michael Maley provide a comprehensive analysis of the 2014 election in light of basic concepts and practices designed to ensure electoral integrity. They note at the outset that "free and fair elections" and "electoral integrity", "are not casual expressions," but central concepts that entail "very specific prescriptions". These need to be observed if elections are to offer political legitimacy. After tracing the experiences of earlier elections, the authors provide a detailed analysis of irregular and fraudulent practices in the 2014 election, concluding that this time fraud was "normalised". The authors discuss a variety of techniques to detect patterns of irregularities and fraud that in principle could be applied, and some of which indeed were used. Assessing the policy implications of their analysis, Maley and Maley recognise the tension - all too evident in 2014 - between dealing with an immediate political crisis arising from elections and maintaining electoral standards, but favor the latter and suggest a range of political disincentives (e.g. international travel ban) and technical adjustments to reduce electoral fraud.

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