

Political and Economic Life in Afghanistan

Networks of Access

ABSTRACT

In Afghanistan, relationship-based networks permeate formal governance institutions, the economy, and everyday life, regulating how resources are distributed. This paper argues that since 2001, modes of external intervention in Afghanistan have failed to understand these “rules of the game.” This paper sets out a new understanding of the power relations that govern engagement in politics and the economy.

KEYWORDS: Afghanistan, networks of access, governance, politics, markets

If I vote for [an] honest person, I am sure he will not be able to resolve my problems. If the police take a member of my family, he will not be able to get them released. . . . Why would I vote for a person who will not be able to resolve my problems?

—Interview respondent, Kandahar

INTRODUCTION

The above quote is taken from a discussion in Kandahar of the Afghan 2014 presidential and provincial council elections. During much of the interview, the man had lamented the corruption and ineffectiveness of the local government. He described in detail the various power networks that

ASHLEY JACKSON is a Research Associate at the Overseas Development Institute, an independent think tank in London, and a doctoral candidate in the War Studies Department, King's College London. She has been engaged in aid work in and policy work on Afghanistan since 2009, including research conducted as part of the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium. GIULIA MINOIA is an independent researcher and consultant currently focused on the interaction between research and programming in economic development. From 2013 to 2016, while based in Afghanistan, she conducted research on market governance and coordinated the country team of a multi-country research program led by the Overseas Development Institute: the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium. Emails: <ashley.a.jackson@gmail.com>, <giulia.minoia@gmail.com>.

Asian Survey, Vol. 58, Number 6, pp. 1090–1110. ISSN 0004-4687, electronic ISSN 1533-838X. © 2018 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/AS.2018.58.6.1090>.

underpinned the local political and economic marketplace: which individuals had formed alliances, which opposed one another, the various sectors of the economy they dominated, and how these overlapped with the more formal business of government. Indeed, many of the individuals he named held some elected or appointed position in government, although their power and influence extended far beyond their notional positions. And yet, when asked whom he would vote for, he said, with a mixture of frustration and sadness, that it would not be the person he thought most “honest.” Instead, he would vote for a person who would be able to “resolve his problems”—in other words, someone who played by the unofficial rules of the game and was well-enough connected to navigate the complex web of relationships that governs everyday life in Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan, there are laws and policies that exist on paper, crafted with significant support from the international community, outlining meritocratic processes and procedures. These laws and policies are premised on neutral, meritocratic and democratic ideals of how a government and society *should* work. However, there is little resemblance between how things should work and the way things actually work in the state and economy that most Afghans experience.

While billions of dollars have been spent to rebuild Afghanistan in the image of a state and society acceptable to Western donors, most observers would agree that this intervention has largely failed to achieve this objective.¹ State institutions remain weak, violent conflict has intensified, corruption is rife, and elections are deeply fraudulent and dysfunctional. Ultimately, the state-building project in Afghanistan was based on a profound and willful misunderstanding of the Afghan social order: little was done to examine Afghanistan as it is, and critically engage with the incentives that drive actual behavior, or to understand the distributional nature at the heart of Afghan politics and the economy. It should be no wonder that the resulting policies failed to achieve the intended objectives.

1. The year 2017 was one of the most violent on record, and the vast amounts of aid disbursed since 2001 have not reduced poverty in Afghanistan. United Nations Assistance Mission Afghanistan Human Rights, *Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict: Annual Report 2017* (Kabul: UNAMA Human Rights, 2018); Central Statistics Organization in cooperation with the Afghan Ministry of Economy and the World Bank, *Afghanistan Living Conditions Survey* (Kabul: Central Statistics Organization, 2018).

This paper offers an exploration of the dynamics that govern Afghan political and economic “marketplaces.”² We refer to these mechanics as the “rules of the game.”³ At the core of these rules lies a networked system of distribution, which we refer to as “networks of access.”⁴ Social rules allow and shape actor participation and connectivity to networks of access, enabling those who have power and resources to extract rents and redistribute them to the benefit of their connections, thus fortifying existing networks and creating new market opportunities.

In international policy circles, there is often a false dichotomy constructed around formal and informal structures. In the case of Afghanistan, formal and informal structures—or what Hallward-Driemeier et al. refer to as the *administratively declared* and *actual* state of the world⁵—are symbiotic and overlapping. Individuals may have accessed power through violence or money (often illicit revenues or profits derived from the war economy) and then captured official appointments and other “legitimate” resources to secure their positions and support their networks. While institutions exist in name and edifice, network connections are what govern access to resources—for example, getting a contract to build a road, gaining employment in the civil service, or securing a space to sell vegetables in a bazaar. This, in turn, generates new market flows and economic opportunities. It is only by understanding how these networks function—the “rules of the game”—that one can begin to understand political and economic life.

Patron–client relations have long shaped Afghan life. As Wilde argues in his study on patron–client relationships in the northern province of Kunduz in the early twentieth century, the Afghan state relied on patron–client relations to establish control in distant areas and perform core state functions such as tax collection. In Kunduz, patrimonialism was not the “corruption” and networked relations we see today but a system of distribution, underpinned by

2. The definition of political marketplace as a system of governance is borrowed from Alex de Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015): 36.

3. Ashley Jackson and Giulia Minoia, “The Rules of the Game: Towards a Theory of Networks of Access,” Briefing Paper 19, Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, London, 2016.

4. Ashley Jackson, *Seeing Like the Networked State: Subnational Governance in Afghanistan*, Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, London, 2016.

5. Mary Hallward-Driemeier, Gita Khun-Jush, and Lan Pritchett, “Deals versus Rules: Policy Implementation Uncertainty and Why Firms Hate It,” Working Paper, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA, 2010.

reciprocity between patrons and their clients, and with clients collectively able to hold them to account.⁶ Then as now, “a clear distinction between formal and informal, state and non-state dimensions of local politics is inappropriate and impedes a structural understanding of local political dynamics.”⁷

Yet these systems of patronage have eroded, and are now traceable only in remnants of reciprocal customary relationships in rural areas. Patrons were once made notable by their traditional positions and responsibilities. They were relied on by clients to mediate with the state, and by the state to help it fulfill its core functions through client relationships. The landscape of allegiances, obligations, and social relations was irrevocably altered by decades of war, multiple foreign interventions, and the disintegration of the state. After 2001, a new group of actors was radically empowered through the military intervention, many of whom have no traditional claim to the influence they wield. Power now lies in the ability to capture international and local resources, and the positions of the most powerful have been earned through violence and war profiteering. This has not only made relations less stable and predictable but has also altered the dynamics and bases of distributional relationships. Patronage, as it has been historically conceived of in Afghanistan, is no longer a lens that accurately captures the multidimensional and often volatile relationships that govern access to resources.

The international community has often externalized the problem of patronage and corruption in Afghanistan, seeing it as something to be rooted out from the state. Ideas of patronage in the literature also construct patronage as somehow separate from the state. Clapham refers to neopatrimonialism as “a form of organization in which relations of a broadly patrimonial type pervade a political and administrative system which is formally constructed on rational-legal lines.”⁸ Clapham goes on to describe the ways in which personalized relations “gum up the works” of a rational, impersonal, and bureaucratic state structure.⁹ This paper asks if, in the Afghanistan case, it might be the other way around: is the foundation of the state actually a set of

6. Definition of patrimonialism adapted from Anne Pitcher, Mary H. Moran, and Michael Johnston, “Rethinking Patrimonialism in Africa,” *African Studies Review* 52:1 (2009): 150.

7. Andreas Wilde, “The Consistency of Patronage: Networks and Powerbrokers of the ‘Arzbeqi Clan’ in Kunduz,” in Conrad Schetter (ed.), *Local Politics in Afghanistan: A Century of Intervention in the Social Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 73.

8. Christopher Clapham, *Third World Politics: An Introduction* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985): 48.

9. Clapham: 49.

dynamic personality-based resource-distribution networks, concealed underneath a legal-rational edifice?

While the state in Afghanistan may have been ostensibly constructed on rational-legal lines, that is not how it was *actually* constructed. While the international community focused on ideating the future of Afghan governance at meetings in the capital and at overseas conferences, other forms of governance were taking hold across the country. The state envisioned in the constitution is hierarchical and centralized, yet the process of state formation on the ground was more or less horizontally woven through alliances among elite networks. *Mujahideen* commanders and warlords drew on US resources and backing to mobilize networks and assume control in the power vacuum left by the fall of the Taliban. The more power they assumed on the ground, the more leverage they had in influencing formal processes, creating a mutually reinforcing cycle.

Rarely attempting to confront or subdue his rivals, President Hamid Karzai instead relied on transactional bargains with personalities at the center of these networks to support the appearance of his dominance. Karzai used the appointment of provincial governors, ministers, and other key positions to solidify elite bargains, thus using state positions to bestow legitimacy on these alliances. This was not the kind of center–periphery relationship in the early twentieth century described by Wilde. The key players gained their state legitimacy and power from international actors rather than on the basis of their local constituencies, to whom they were obligated to distribute resources.

Rather than more traditional, hierarchical notions of patron–client relations, a network-based theory is more appropriate to describe the complexity and volatility of relationships. The conceptual framework adopted in this paper, networks of access, builds on Granovetter’s work on the strength or weakness of ties within networks and broader work from the sociological theory of networks.¹⁰ Network theories illuminate the complexity and dynamic nature of resource-based relationships in Afghanistan. Empirically, this analysis draws on the analysis of Afghan politics and economy conducted by the authors in Afghanistan between 2013 and 2016 under the umbrella of

10. Mark S. Granovetter, “The Strength of Weak Ties: A Network Theory Revisited,” *Sociological Theory* 1 (1983): 201–33; Alexander Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004); Manuel Castells, “A Theory of Network Power,” *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011): 773–87.

the Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, a multi-country research program investigating access to livelihoods and services in conflict environments.¹¹ In particular, it draws on a set of parallel studies conducted by the authors on political settlements at the subnational level and commodity markets in two Afghan provinces, Nangarhar and Kandahar. It seeks to present an integrated understanding of how these relationships function across the state and market, which are often treated separately in policy terms but are deeply intertwined in practice.

TOWARD A THEORY OF NETWORKS OF ACCESS

In the policies and programs designed after 2001 in Afghanistan, neoliberal models of how the Weberian state should function (i.e., based on objective rules and impersonal institutions) are deeply ingrained. A relationship of accountability between the citizens and the state is assumed. However, when market programs reduced to stripped-down value-chain models are implemented at the field level, they reveal that the social institutions working on the ground shape real actors' access to opportunities. Building a road or supporting cold chain (temperature-controlled supply chain) supply mechanisms in itself will not necessarily bring economic growth, and the key questions of who actually benefits (such as who has been contracted to build the road, and who controls the producers' access to the road or to the cold chain) are often unasked. Networks—not formal rules or institutions—are the means of participation in the economic and political marketplace.

The central premise of this paper is that networks of access not only dominate the state and the economy in Afghanistan, they *constitute* the state and economy.¹² Various overlapping and competing personality-based networks are the fundamental structures that regulate economic, social, and political behavior. In the networked state, actors and their actions are interdependent and personalized rather than independent, institution-based, or autonomous, contrary to ideas of impersonal Weberian state-building. Actors in networks access power through connectivity (or relational ties). Connections are distributive, requiring access to or control over resources. So, how is

11. All reports can be found online, at <<http://www.securelivelihoods.org>>.

12. Timor Sharan, "The Political Economy of the Networked State: The Post-2001 Afghanistan," paper presented at the First Annual Central Asian Studies Institute Conference, October 2011, <https://www.auca.kg/uploads/CASI/Working_Papers/WP%20Sharan.pdf>.

this distribution governed? What determines the options for connection? And what incentives and sanctions enable or discourage the behavior of actors within this system?

First, networks are not governed by hierarchical or rigid prescriptions but by boundaries and protocols, referred to here as the “rules of the game.” Borrowing from Galloway’s framework for understanding actor behavior in the realm of the Internet, which outlines how protocols (or rules) organize behavior within networks, protocols are envisioned here as structuring the space within which action can be taken.¹³ These protocols determine how actors can navigate their real-world constraints. These protocols govern the exercise of power.¹⁴ This allows for actors to be simultaneously constrained and autonomous in varying ways; the room for maneuver correlates to how much power an actor has at their disposal.

Second, networks, by definition, are not hierarchical, marking a significant departure from the broader literature on Afghan patron–client relations. This is not to say that networks of access are egalitarian or flat; here, power relations are expressed through connectivity. A set of ties creates a network. The power of networks is determined by their connectivity or the sum of connective ties and the potential they provide for further ties.¹⁵ Power is cultivated through network connections, because ties are *reciprocal*, in that individuals are obligated to one another. Connections are also *distributional*, in that they enable resource flows and sharing; strategies of power accumulation require access to resources. Crucially, network connections can only be forged where sufficient resources are available to support them.

It follows that those with the greatest connectivity across multiple networks can access the greatest power. However, the quality of connections matters. Granovetter’s work on strong versus weak ties is useful in understanding how actors assemble their connections.¹⁶ Connections are reciprocal, meaning that they may be as constraining as they are enabling, depending on the expectation of compliance. The assemblage of connections that will maximize power varies according to the environment in which an actor operates and the actor’s objectives. An actor with weaker connections is likely

13. Galloway, *Protocol*, 12.

14. Castells, “Theory of Network Power,” 14.

15. Granovetter, “Strength of Weak Ties.”

16. *Ibid.*

to be less constrained because they have a lesser degree of obligation (but also less protection from risk) than an actor with stronger ones. Weak connections imply weak obligations (often embodied by lower investment and a shorter time horizon) and low expectations of compliance, but also agility. An actor with weaker connections may be a freer agent, but the lack of reciprocal obligations, and the consequent lack of protection from risk, mean that they are less likely to thrive economically.

Strong connections come with strong obligations: they are likely to be combined with high expectations of a durable relationship, implying a high exit cost. Diversifying relations by assembling an array of weak connections across multiple networks may allow an actor to spread risk in an uncertain environment. However, in more stable, predictable circumstances, an actor with a larger number of weak connections might hold less power or influence than one with a smaller number of stronger connections. In Afghanistan, there are striking differences between relatively stable rural areas on the one hand, where ties may be far stronger (so investing in long-term relationships may matter more), and urban centers and other contested or fragmented areas on the other.

REGIONAL NETWORKS OF ACCESS: NANGARHAR AND KANDAHAR

While the idea of networks frames this analysis, the historical and social context in which these networks are embedded influences the opportunities for connectivity and the general configuration of networks. How the post-2001 state has been constructed has undoubtedly influenced the formation of these networks, but so has the larger historical and geographic construction of space. Many major elite networks are anchored, geographically and concerning identity, in Afghanistan's four major regional centers/provinces: Herat in the west, Balkh in the north, Nangarhar in the east, and Kandahar in the south. Historically and in the current context, each has presented a unique challenge to the authority and cohesiveness of the central state. Barfield compares these regions to toy building blocks that have been "fitted together in many different ways over the course of time"—at times as part of other empires or as independent entities—"but each block . . . survives and re-emerges as a distinct region no matter the changes in political organization, arrivals

of new populations or religions, or attempts to impose larger and more uniform identities on them.”¹⁷

This paper draws on empirical evidence from two of these major centers of power: Nangarhar and Kandahar. Both are borderlands characterized by strong political and economic links to Pakistan and relative independence from the central government. The two provincial capitals, Jalalabad and Kandahar, are linked by the routes of refugees and trade to the Pakistani cities of Peshawar and Quetta, and both are characterized by a strong Pashtun identity and tribal structures.

In Afghanistan, the capital of Jalalabad has long been seen as little more than a “secondary center . . . sandwiched between the greater urban centers of Kabul and Peshawar.”¹⁸ The position of Pakistan—as a power center, a past source of refuge, and a continuing source of employment—has oriented Jalalabad strongly to the south and Peshawar rather than to the north and Kabul. Nangarhar’s economy is strongly linked into Pakistan for trade and employment, although there is a sharp geographic division. In the hills and mountains, there has long been a more marginal economy that is critically dependent on outmigration and remittance income from Pakistan. In contrast, the flat irrigated plains are an area of agricultural surplus, which is largely traded with Pakistan. More generally, links to Pakistan are reflected in everyday life, including the use of the Pakistani rupee (PKR) rather than the afghani (AFN) as the everyday currency, as well as the frequent travel of residents to Pakistan for work and medical care. Also, many families from the east sought refuge in Pakistan during the previous period of conflict and have maintained strong links ever since.

Nangarhari politics is dominated by a cadre of *mujahedeen* commanders. In the post-Taliban state, these men were able to secure roles in government, through election or appointment, and capture state resources to secure their position in informal access networks. This includes the capture of the sizable customs and border revenues, through informal taxes and the siphoning-off of formal duties, as well as direct influence over the broader spectrum of economic activity in the east. They also capitalize on the insecurity that has

17. Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010): 48–49.

18. *Ibid.*, 104.

plagued the east, with intensive troop presence and securitized aid, largely focused on poppy eradication, directed to the area.

This massive influx of resources, via the war and aid economy, led to the creation of what de Waal terms a “rentier political marketplace.”¹⁹ It is characterized by pervasive rent-seeking in both the economy and in the political sphere, where both sovereign and intermediate elites compete for access to resources supplied by the international community. Departing from patronage patterns of the past, the marketplace has been heavily influenced by securitized aid and military assets; wanting to be seen as providing “security” and thus gain favor with international forces has been a significant driver of behavior for many elites at the center of personality-based networks.

The access to resources that this massive influx of money has provided has ranged from the establishment of private construction and security firms and rent-seeking by government officials and informal power brokers through the project approval and implementation process. Those that secured US backing were able to strengthen their position vis-à-vis their rivals. This is true both among major power holders, such as former Governor Gul Aga Sherzai or the powerful Arsala family, and at the local level, among village rivals or competing tribes.

With an even larger troop presence and more aid funds devoted to it, Kandahar is also seen as a rentier political marketplace—albeit unquestionably more violent and volatile than Nangarhar. In the higher reaches of the city’s economy, the flow of funds from the military and aid expenditures is captured and regulated by powerful figures to their advantage; access to the economy is subject to their control.²⁰ Chief among these were Gul Aga Sherzai (a governor of Kandahar before his transfer to Nangarhar) and Ahmed Wali Karzai, an influential political figure (as the elected head of the Provincial Council) and businessman as well as a brother of President Hamid Karzai.²¹

Both Nangarhar and Kandahar are more linked to the center, the capital of Kabul, through politics, while the economic, political, and social/familial linkages face outward, toward Pakistan. Ruling elites need strong connections

19. Alex De Waal, “Mission without End? Peacekeeping in the African Political Marketplace,” *International Affairs* 85 (2009): 1.

20. Giulia Minoia and Adam Pain, “Saffron: The Social Relations of Production,” working paper, Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium and Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, London, 2016.

21. Jackson, *Seeing Like the Networked State*.

to the center for political survival, but their linkages to the international military forces and their control of border trade and local economic activity are equally, if not more, important to their influence. As the remainder of the paper illustrates, networks of access function across the social, political, and economic spectra, from the political elite to traders surviving on the margins of the economy.

THE RULES OF THE GAME

Trust Is the Coin of the Realm

Bargains and transactions, driven by mutual dependency, occur in a broader context of acute lack of trust. The absence of generalized trust is fueled by Afghanistan's weak institutions but is also a symptom of this weakness. Tribe, ethnicity, geographic identity, and so on strongly influence the patterning of connections. These socio-cultural factors create the basis for trust and play an essential role in creating options for connectivity.

High-level political and economic actors are generally motivated to extend their power over as many spheres as they can, generating as much control over resources and redistributable income as possible, to the exclusion of competitors. Major power brokers like Gul Agha Sherzai and Ahmed Wali Karzai, in Nangarhar and Kandahar, sought to control resources for two main reasons: to build their networks (through patronage, which is the primary means of maximizing their power) and to close off opportunities to rivals or enemies. Trust at the elite level is deeply dependent on the knowledge that one has the resources to buy compliance. These alliances can be fitful; rivals may collaborate for a limited period of time if their interests overlap, then seek to undermine one another, and then, at a later date, cooperate and collude once again.

Those whose ambitions are more modest and more focused on survival, such as farmers growing onions in Nangarhar's rural outer districts, must still rely on connections. Farmers in Nangarhar who live on informal credit from traders are obliged to accept the price offered, even though they have access to the current price of the commodity. They sell their product very cheaply due to collusion on prices among traders in the provincial capital. This applies to not only economic pursuits but also access to basic services, public goods, and protection. Gaining access to a job teaching in a secondary school, obtaining

a passport, even securing a family member's release from jail, all require connections.

Diversifying relations by assembling an array of connections across multiple networks allows an actor to spread risk in an uncertain and highly volatile environment. Conversely, actors with fewer connections and with connections focused on the peripheries of networks have fewer options and less influence; these networks have a longer existence, but less power. Ties of loyalty among individuals who are part of the same network derive from kinship or tribal affiliations, or from deliberate choices to access the highest possible arenas of power and volumes of capital. The more detached individuals are from familial ties, the shorter the life of the network.

So how does one know whom to trust, and what are the bases of these personalized relations? Personalized trust can be found in those groups sharing kinship ties, such as the family, tribe, or ethnic group. The role of various forms of identity, such as tribes, militias or kinship-based entities, is critical. Ties of loyalty among individuals who are part of the same network can also derive from belonging to the same geographic area or from alliances made in the pursuit of self-interest. These socio-cultural factors shore up mutual trust and play an essential role in creating options for connections, but they are not all that matter. Notions of identity, particularly those related to tribe, draw on what Roy terms a "mythological reference to a tribal past," but more than mythological, these references are also functional and, to some degree, opportunistic.²²

Commodity markets explain this well. What lubricates production and trade are extensive but circumscribed networks of informal credit, where transactions function only on the basis of accountability provided by personalized trust and personal relationships. The inability to access credit is the true mark of social exclusion, but at the same time, the benefits of inclusion depend largely on the terms and conditions of the deal and on what is expected in return. Markers of social identity such as gender, status, wealth, and ultimately family connections regulate access to informal credit.

In Nangarhar, onion growers receive credit from district traders, and the large vegetable traders in the capital of Jalalabad provide credit to smaller traders, also to limit and control the volume of their business. In Kandahar,

22. Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986): 15.

street vendors initially must establish a relationship of trust with wholesalers, and to do this, they have to be introduced by a family member who has already secured a spot in the market, or by a police officer. Only after this can they purchase inputs or goods to sell on credit. Why do traders and farmers accept such unfavorable terms set by economic power brokers? Because in the absence of any form of accountable institution representing the common good, having some connection, even if it is a loose one, with powerful networks is the only way to get access to the market.

The networks shaping the trade of fruit and vegetables from eastern Afghanistan into Pakistan across the Torkham border illustrate this point. A small elite leveraged their links to a former governor (Sherzai) to create a cartel. These traders manipulated the market by setting prices, controlling volumes, and restricting credit to smaller farmers to prevent their being competitive. Onion growers in the districts of Nangarhar, in fact, sell their products on credit at the beginning of the season to traders that offer to buy and pay beforehand, returning to load the onions on their trucks after the harvest.

For small onion growers in the districts this may be a bad deal, but it is a relatively stable one, and it is the only one available. Compliance on both sides is guaranteed through a string of interpersonal relationships. Actors within these networks are tied not only directly but also by secondary, tertiary, and various indirect connections. If the terms of the bargain are violated or someone defaults, pressure can be exerted on the defaulter through family members, members of the same tribe or ethnicity, business associates, members of the district or provincial council, or others with whom they have direct or indirect connections.

Not all networks are exactly alike, and the nature of relationships strongly informs how they function. In contrast to the Jalalabad vegetable market, where kinship-based ties are far weaker, street vendors in Kandahar are tightly connected by tribe and geography. Most street vendors come from the same district, Panjwai, and have links with bigger traders in the Spin Boldak district, across the border in Pakistan. Membership is secured through sharing the same geographical home or belonging to the same tribe. This provides access to the urban space of the bazaar for street vendors; at the same time, it is what grants them the initial capital to establish their trading in the market. Vendors from the same geographic area usually gather around the same location in the city and deal in the same commodity. Tribal and kinship ties

provide newcomers to the city an entry point to handle the inherently conflictual relationships with the police and municipality.

Institutions Are Personalized

The reliance on network ties to create trust is both a symptom and a consequence of pervasively low generalized trust. Because formal or state institutions are either absent or cannot be trusted, personal ties are essential to navigating the political and economic marketplace.²³ Loans cannot often be secured from banks for many Afghans, the state cannot provide adequate guarantees of security, and so on. So, what then is the role of formal state institutions? Institutions are the manifestation of the power and will of those individuals who have the funds and networks to access public offices and to be appointed to them. *The state does not exist above or beyond the reach of networks.* Nonetheless, the state matters because it confers legitimacy and because it is a conduit for and generates resources.

Securing a role in the state, through election or appointment, allows now-influential individuals to achieve a degree of public-facing legitimacy. More importantly, it enables their capture of state, non-state, and international resources and thus to secure connections and power through patronage. In the early years of the international intervention, cultivating close relations with international military forces and international donors was essential (roughly from 2001 through 2006, but it remained significant after that). Generally speaking, an appointment to a high-level position (governor, police chief) in an insecure province assured access to military aid (which was often channeled to private militias or semiformal security forces), military spending (through, in the past, Provincial Reconstruction Teams and other military or military-aid streams), a degree of control over aid projects, and, perhaps most importantly, the capture of international customs and border revenues.²⁴

As a result, there are no truly public goods provided by the state, and even the most basic forms of protection, access to education, and economic opportunities must be sought through network ties. This is thrown into sharp relief

23. Francis Fukuyama, *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (New York: Free Press, 1995); Alina Rocha Menocal, Verena Fritz, and Lise Rakner, "Hybrid Regimes and the Challenges for Deepening and Sustaining Democracies in Developing Countries," *South African Journal of International Affairs* 15 (2008): 29–40.

24. Jackson and Minoia, *Rules of the Game*.

when looking at state security forces—which, like all other state institutions, serve the interests of those at the center of dominant networks. In Kandahar, security forces are consolidated under the control of General Raziq’s extended network.²⁵ While technically a provincial police chief, he is the center of the most powerful tribal network in the south, the Achakzai. Initially, he developed critical relations with the most powerful men in Kandahar, including Sherzai and the Karzais. His strength derived from his economic control of the border, including control of customs revenue but also lucrative side businesses; he established a trucking company and is believed to have accumulated interests in several other businesses, generating an estimated US\$ 5–6 million per month in 2010.²⁶ He also built strong relationships with US forces. He provided them intelligence, but more importantly he kept the critical border-crossing route secure enough for the transit of international military assets and supplies.

Because institutions express the power of networks, they rarely act in the interests of those with little power. Institutions often prey on, are problematic for, or simply exclude many of those on the periphery of networks. The exclusion and harassment of certain networks have led to widespread resentment and provided fertile ground for the insurgency, particularly in the south. In Kandahar City, many praise provincial Police Chief Raziq for bringing security to the capital. But not everyone enjoys the same access to security. The privileged few belonging to the right tribe or other affiliation aligned with Raziq’s networks enjoy relative protection, while those from competing tribes or with affiliations outside Raziq’s network are subjected to violence, harassment, and coercion.²⁷

How this plays out for ordinary Aghans is illustrated by the everyday coercion and uncertainty of life in Kandahar. It is common among the street vendors in Kandahar City to say that power stays with the police. The Kandahar police manage law and order in the city by asking the street

25. Ashley Jackson, “Politics and Governance in Afghanistan: The Case of Kandahar,” working paper, Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium, 2015; Giulia Minoia and Adam Pain, “90% Real—Rise and Fall of a Rentier Economy: Stories from Kandahar,” working paper, Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium and Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, London, 2015.

26. Jackson, “Politics and Governance in Afghanistan.”

27. Mathieu Aikins, “The Master of Spin Boldak,” *Harper’s*, December 2009; Anand Gopal, *No Good Men among the Living: America, the Taliban and the War through Afghan Eyes* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014); Human Rights Watch, “Just Don’t Call It a Militia: Impunity, Militias and the ‘Afghan Local Police,’” New York, 2011.

vendors, who still have an uncertain legal status, to become informants. This relationship between street vendors and the police gives authorities intelligence on newcomers to the city and gives the street vendors continued physical access to the bazaar. The police are constantly monitoring potential insurgent activity in the city and patrolling those areas, such as the neighborhood of Loya Wala,²⁸ that provide shelter to people who have been moving to urban Kandahar to escape the raging violence in the districts.

In Jalalabad, a collective body, the Directorate of Craftsmen and Traders, worked on the basis of its members' affiliations with Sherzai. With support from Sherzai, a small group of traders in the city were designated to lead the new vegetable and fruit market physically built through USAID investments in 2004–2005.²⁹ This small group—four traders ruling the market, with Haji Gul Murad being the largest—returned from Pakistan after the refugee time with new connections that became useful for establishing transnational business links. One of the reasons behind the huge counter-seasonal traffic crossing Torkham and benefitting this trading elite is that the planned industrial park with cold storage facilities has never been built.³⁰

The *ittihadia* (traders' association) gathers around 50 members in Jalalabad, who pay an annual fee to be represented at the governor's councils, at meetings of the regional and National Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and in international negotiations with potential partners in Pakistan, India, or Dubai. However, in spite of the administrative role of this institution, the head, Haji Gul Murad, is still closely linked to Sherzai. This ensures that the interests of this small group of well-connected traders are met, in particular around issues related to informal taxation at the Torkham border. For example, the *ittihadia* and the National Chamber of Commerce and Industry managed to restore the use of an unofficial *kantha* (weighbridge) 2 km from the border for a short period of time. Only those traders close to Sherzai knew that for a few weeks the weighing of lorries was stopped and the *kantha* restored so that they could reach Karachi at a lower cost. This shows how information is managed by a very small group; the association is, therefore,

28. Anand Gopal, "Kandahar's Mystery Executions," *Harper's*, April 2014.

29. Giulia Minoia, Wamiqullah Mumtaz, and Adam Pain, "The Social Life of the Onion: The Informal Regulation of the Onion Market in Nangarhar, Afghanistan," Working Paper 26, Secure Livelihoods Research Consortium and Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, London, 2014.

30. Tommaso Giovacchini, "Jalalabad City Profile," USAID LARA project, Kabul, 2013.

a means to meet this elite interest, especially regarding formal and informal border taxation.

The formation of networks after 2001 happened under different conditions in Nangarhar and Kandahar,³¹ the southern capital being exposed to a unique inflow of international spending. While in Nangarhar the elite traders need to be shielded by an institution like the National Chamber of Commerce and Industry to gain favorable terms in cross-border taxation, in Kandahar Raziq and his Achakzai at Spin Boldak directly and openly control cross-border tax.

The Future Is Discounted

As a strategy for coping with the volatility and uncertainty, many actors adopt short-term horizons and limit risk exposure wherever they can. The adoption of longer time horizons is a luxury that many cannot afford. Political actors plan for the next election cycle or the drawdown of troops; few farmers look beyond the next harvest.³² While the international community's projections of drawdown predicted the beginning of a new era for foreign investments, with the agricultural markets boosted by niches of high-value crops for export,³³ this did not materialize. The demand for services that was created by military expenditures and reconstruction funds disappeared, leaving those at the margins of those bubble economies stranded, living in an increasingly violent Afghanistan.

While this system of networks itself has been remarkably resilient, it is nonetheless volatile. Specific incidents of volatility may be mistaken for actual structural change, but volatility is a structural feature and helps explain why, even as political alliances and bargains change dramatically from week to week, the system ultimately functions in the same manner over many years.³⁴ Despite changes in individuals or individual relationships, the same patterns of relations repeatedly emerge; the players may change, but the rules do not.

Evidence from the field has shown that violence and risk are two recurrent dimensions of the experience Afghans face in their lives. The Afghan context

31. Jackson, *Seeing Like the Networked State*.

32. Christoph Zürcher, "Conflict, State Fragility and Aid Effectiveness: Insights from Afghanistan," *Conflict, Security & Development* 12:5 (2012): 461–80.

33. World Bank, "Afghanistan Agriculture Sector Review: Revitalizing Agriculture for Economic Growth, Job Creation and Food Security," Washington, DC, 2014.

34. Alex de Waal (in *The Real Politics in the Horn of Africa*) surmises much the same with regard to the Horn of Africa.

presents the opposite of the very definition of the term “security” provided by Geoff Wood, “the avoidance of fear about safety.”³⁵ We see examples of the outcomes of constant exposure to multiple risks for the actors, which ultimately leads actors to what Wood calls the “phenomenology of insecurity.”³⁶ The outcomes of constant insecurity can be recognized in Afghanistan as aversion to risk, emphasis on physical and social reproduction, and significance of localized social resources. These restrictions on the actors’ behavior are taken further by rent-seeking practices, as a form of loyalty over voice, in the absence of any exit option. The relationship between street vendors and the local authorities of Kandahar further explains how the vendors have no choice but to comply with what the police and municipality demand of them. Street vendors in the bazaar live with the constant threat of having the police storm in, beat them, and take their goods away. They are therefore compelled to cooperate, providing information that can eventually feed counterinsurgency operations. They have no exit option; they cannot leave urban Kandahar, where they first moved to escape the violence in the districts in the years of military presence in the south of the country (2005–2009). At that time, the boom of foreign expenditures created demand for goods such as second-hand mobile phones and provided better living conditions for many. But with the economic downturn that resulted as international troop presence (and aid) decreased from 2013–14 onwards, the demand for services dramatically decreased.³⁷

From 2014, the authorities decided to register and distribute licenses to each vendor in Kandahar in an attempt to control their number and presence in the streets, feeling them as a threat. This shift of behavior started after a few incidents in April 2014, when, as respondents reported, explosives were left near street vendors’ carts just before the political elections. So far, the only street vendor who is officially recognized and who regularly works as an informant has been in the bazaar for 20 years. He meets regularly with the head of the police station in the bazaar, and he has regular meetings with the National Directory of Security, but others work sporadically with the police to give them information on newcomers, and in return they can receive some

35. Geoff Wood, “Using Security to Indicate Wellbeing,” in Ian Good et al. (eds.), *Wellbeing in Developing Countries: From Theory to Research* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

36. Geoff Wood, “Staying Secure, Staying Poor: The Faustian Bargain,” *World Development* 31 (2003): 462.

37. Minoia and Pain, “90% Real.”

money or just protection. Adopting street vendors as informants can be useful to the police and can reduce the violence the vendors experience, but it does not benefit petty traders as a group.

In Nangarhar, there is some evidence that small traders from the districts put in place forms of risk-taking and strategic agency in those niches where onion production is particularly favorable (based on variety, quality, and quantity). Some traders from Nangarhar districts were found who had established connections with Peshawar and Kabul to escape the control of the Jalalabad elite. Traders from Sukhrod District reported a preference for dealing with Kabul (and in afghani rather than in Pakistani rupees), since the market in Kabul is more accessible in terms of credit structures and traders there pay after 10 to 15 days, rather than the two to three months in Jalalabad. But the majority of traders from this district still prefer to do business with those belonging to the same area or ideally the same tribe, and many work with Noor Agha, a trader from Sukhrod well established in Jalalabad.

The unpredictability of market-price fluctuations dissuades small traders from taking any risk on their own. Stories are told about sending loaded trucks to Kabul and Peshawar after checking prices by phone and then watching the price drop as another load came to market at the same time. This speaks of collusion over prices, a practice in many commodity markets in Afghanistan.³⁸

Even larger-scale examples of successful resistance and renegotiation do little to alter the underlying system. When Sherzai was appointed governor of Nangarhar in 2004, he had to demonstrate his worth to the international forces by showing he could deliver on poppy eradication. Because he came from Kandahar and had no local constituency in the east, he turned largely to tribes and elders neglected by his predecessors. These elders had newfound leverage to extract resources not only from Sherzai's network (informally) but also from the formal state.³⁹ More broadly, this is also true of elections, where national power-holders are dependent on peripheral constituencies to deliver votes in order to fulfill bargains struck with other actors and extend their influence.⁴⁰

38. Sarah Lister and Adam Pain, "Trading in Power: The Politics of Free Markets in Afghanistan," briefing paper, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2004.

39. Jackson, "Politics and Governance in Afghanistan."

40. Sharan, "Political Economy of the Networked State."

This has left many disenfranchised. The future is discounted not merely due to risk but also due to a lack of willingness to invest in the kind of future being offered. To survive and earn a livelihood, many Afghans are forced to make choices that create moral conflict. Many of those interviewed in the course of our fieldwork expressed anger and frustration regarding the closed, relationship-based system of access.

CONCLUSION

Instead of the state envisioned by the international community, more than 17 years of intervention have led to consolidation of the very political factors that will block growth: predation, rent-seeking behavior, and lack of investment in public goods. Afghanistan remains deeply reliant on the aid it receives each year from donors, though the very objective of that aid was to build a capable, accountable, and largely self-sufficient state.⁴¹

Nonetheless, this paper suggests that Afghanistan can be understood by international actors through first acknowledging the social institutions that rule the economy and the state and how these function. The networks-of-access framework displayed in this paper works within a hybrid political order. As explained by Boege et al., in those contexts we call “fragile” or “failing,” the state is just one actor among many.⁴² Militias, clans, and religious leaders all share authority, legitimacy, and ultimately power. Boege also urges us to think of these hybrid orders not as “close to failing” or “already failed” but to examine them on their own terms. The “failed or failing states” discourse is a dangerous one in that it prevents and obscures analysis of the social and economic orders that exist, and often thrive, in contexts marked by weak institutions, lack of respect for the law, extensive corruption, and pervasive coercion and violence.

It is clear that we do not yet have the right categories to explain how political and economic life function in Afghanistan: the attempt has been hampered by Western narratives of how things *should* work. This paper follows Boege in attempting to examine Afghanistan as it is, specifically how Afghans experience it. Afghan politics and markets are today “the outcome of

41. Gareth Williams et al., “Politics and Growth,” *Development Policy Review* 29 (2009): 29–55.

42. Volker Boege, Anne Brown, Kevin Clements, and Anna Nolan, *On Hybrid Political Orders and Emerging States: State Formation in the Context of Fragility* (Berlin: Berghof Research Centre for Constructive Conflict Management, 2008).

illicit and aid driven elements and the outcome of decades of war, low state capacity and foreign interference and aid dependence.”⁴³ Rather than being a failed or failing state, it is a political and economic order altogether different from those that Western donors and multilateral institutions would categorize as a success.

43. Richard Ghiasy, Jiayi Zhou, and Henrik Hallgren, *Afghanistan's Private Sector: Status and Ways Forward* (Stockholm: SIPRI, 2015): ix.