

THE COLLAPSE OF AFGHANISTAN⁵

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Abstract. *Conventional wisdom suggests that the Afghan republic fell because societal values were incompatible with democracy and the country was simply ungovernable. This article traces the state's collapse to the highly centralized political institutions imposed after the 2001 U.S. invasion. Instead of offering citizens an opportunity to oversee their government in a meaningful way, Kabul-centric institutions – holdovers from the country's authoritarian past – undermined citizen trust in government. Flooded with vast amounts of foreign aid, the post-2001 system fostered corruption. After twenty years, Afghans were unwilling to fight for a distant government that did not treat them with dignity.*

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan ended on 15 August 2021. That afternoon, President Ashraf Ghani fled the capital city by helicopter to neighboring Uzbekistan. Just days earlier, he had sworn never to leave and said that he would die before abandoning his people. With Ghani gone, the Taliban offensive, which had captured dozens of provincial capitals in the preceding weeks, easily entered Kabul. Within hours, the insurgents sat comfortably at Ghani's desk.

Why did the Afghan republic collapse so completely and so quickly, spurring tens of thousands of desperate people to run to the Kabul airport in hopes of escaping the Taliban's harsh rule and potential retribution? Conventional wisdom says that the U.S.-backed republic fell because the country's government and society were hopelessly corrupt, and its values were incompatible with democracy. In other words, Afghanistan was ungovernable and would always be a lost cause for the outside world – a graveyard of empires.

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Such views are widespread and even understandable, but also completely wrong. Rather, the policy choices made by the United States and its partners in Afghanistan over the past twenty years are largely to blame. The international community made many avoidable mistakes in its attempts at state-building. Painting Afghan society with a broad brush only obfuscates missteps made by those in power – in both Washington and Kabul. Unless there is soul searching about what went wrong, the international community and the United States are likely to repeat the same mistakes somewhere else.

In April 2021, U.S. president Joseph Biden announced that the United States would leave Afghanistan by 11 September 2021. This would end the long drawdown initiated by President Barack Obama, who in December 2009 announced a temporary military and civilian surge and promised to begin withdrawing troops in 2011. Despite the surge, the security situation in the country worsened, and the Taliban movement was emboldened as it had made territorial gains throughout the countryside. In hopes of brokering a negotiated end to the war, Obama began informal negotiations with the Taliban to find a political solution to the quagmire. His successor, Donald Trump, was determined to leave Afghanistan completely, and his administration engaged the Taliban in formal negotiations, culminating in the February 2020 Doha Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan. The Taliban agreed to prevent al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations from operating in Afghanistan in return for the withdrawal of all NATO forces from the country.

The Afghan government collapsed before the 31 August 2021 withdrawal deadline. Images from across the country of Afghan soldiers quickly surrendering to the Taliban led many foreign analysts to focus on the ability of the United States and its allies to build armies. In Washington and European capitals, military experts began fretting about “right-sizing” armies and pointing to the centrality of logistics and the loss of crucial U.S. air support. These analyses reflected a misunderstanding of what happened. The collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) was not due to technical issues; it fell to pieces for political reasons. No amount of technical assistance or better-targeted logistical support would have sustained this fighting force, because these soldiers believed they had nothing left to fight for.

The Afghan state collapsed because it lacked legitimacy in the eyes of the people. The sources of this legitimacy crisis were multiple and interwoven. First, the 2004 Constitution created a system of governance that provided Afghan citizens with few opportunities to participate in or have any meaningful oversight of their government. As a result, the gap between the rhetoric of the U.S. intervention and citizens' realities widened with each passing year.

Second, the international coalition was focused on fighting an insurgency and consolidating power – missions distinct from and often at odds with democracy-building. International donors desperate for quick fixes poured vast resources into Afghanistan with minimal monitoring. And rather than reforming dysfunctional state institutions, they created parallel ones, further undermining state legitimacy.

Third, the intemperate rule of President Ashraf Ghani (2014–21) hastened state collapse. Ghani, who kept a tight, close circle and had only a narrow base of support, micromanaged both the economy and the state, and he discriminated against ethnic minorities. Many had expected that the erudite president, who has a doctorate in anthropology and had worked for the World Bank, would rule as a technocrat. Yet his behavior was more authoritarian than democratic.

Finally, it was only with the support of Pakistan that the Taliban could reemerge as a political and military force. After the Taliban government collapsed in 2001 in the wake of the U.S. invasion, its leaders fled to Pakistan, where they would remain for the next two decades. Yet, had the Afghan state not been considered illegitimate by the people, the Taliban would not have had a fighting chance inside of Afghanistan. In other words, without the kindling of poor governance, the fire of insurgency would never have been lit.

Afghanistan has been caught in a four-decade-long cycle of state collapse. In that time, five regimes have been overthrown and replaced by subsequent governments that each resembled the last, with the same centralized political institutions that have characterized the Afghan state's modern existence. Thus the Taliban are for a second time ruling over one of the world's most centralized states. If the past forty years teach us anything, it is that without devolving some authority away from the capital, the Taliban's current reign will be both violent and short-lived.

A Republic Without the People

It is easy to believe that Afghanistan was not prepared for democracy given the rapid fall of its democratic government. But the country's 2004 Constitution included few provisions for democratic decision-making, and many that were included were never implemented. That was a policy choice made by Afghanistan's political leaders with little opposition from U.S. and NATO patrons.

Convergence of the rules of society and the state is essential for political stability and development as well as for the provision of public goods and services [1]. When the United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001, it found a highly fragmented society whose regions had distinct experiences and allegiances formed from decades of conflict. Yet rather than incorporating and building on these diversities, the formal rules of politics established after 2001 aimed to transform Afghanistan into a highly unitary system [2]. The original sin of this intervention was to resurrect old institutions that had their roots in the country's authoritarian past rather than giving Afghans the opportunity to build something new that embodied the norms of self-governance which characterized most parts of the country. The post-2001 republic inadvertently re-created the maladies that drove instability in past governments. Beginning with the violent reign of "Iron Amir" Abdur Rahman Khan (1880–1901), Afghan rulers have repeated the same pattern: They have used central-government authority to impose a new vision on society with little input from citizens.

The UN-sponsored Bonn Conference of 2001 established the political foundations of the Afghan republic, reinstating the 1964 Constitution as the interim basic law and selecting Hamid Karzai as the interim political leader. That constitution was the product of Afghanistan's experiment with constitutional democracy under King Muhammad Zahir Shah (1933–73). Although it had democratic elements, it was an authoritarian document designed merely to provide citizens some breathing room. It featured a king and a prime minister. Modifications made in Bonn fused the powers of the monarch and premier into a very powerful president.

Most at Bonn believed the old constitution to be a source of much-needed continuity during a period of instability [3]. Some factions of the Northern Alliance (one of four Afghan groups to participate at Bonn),

however, resisted and asked for a more decentralized system to accommodate Afghanistan's diverse ethnic makeup. But the old unitary system was alluring to the Afghan leaders as well as to the international community. The newly appointed interim-president, Hamid Karzai, and those around him preferred a system of strong control because it allowed Karzai to concentrate his power vis-à-vis potential rivals. Similarly, the United States preferred such a system because it cultivated unity of command, making it easier to monitor its investments in Afghanistan and to coordinate with the new government.

In 2004, a Constitutional Loya Jirga (Grand Council) promulgated a new basic law that departed from the 1964 Constitution most significantly in calling for a democratically elected president. The 2004 Constitution not only reinstated an old system of government, but it also resurrected the old administrative regulations governing public finance, the bureaucracy, the police, and other key elements of a functioning state. Many of these regulations had been strongly influenced by the Soviet Union, whose own attempts at institution-building in Afghanistan began in the 1950s and were not democratic. These top-down rules, which went mostly unnoticed by the international community, also severely limited the state's ability to project power outside the capital.

Democratic development was also hindered by the country's electoral law, which used the single nontransferable vote (SNTV) system with provincial, rather than district, multimember constituencies to elect members of parliament. This system was chosen in part to blunt the strength of the *mujahideen*, who, it was widely feared, might resist submitting to a new central authority. In the 2005 elections for the 249-seat parliament (Wolesi Jirga), candidates were banned from affiliating with political parties. Although that regulation was subsequently modified, the SNTV system weakened political parties, thereby stymieing the formation of a healthy opposition to the president and denying citizens an important link to the government and voice in policy development.

Consequently, parliament was much weaker than the president, who possessed vast constitutional powers, including the power to appoint ministers, Supreme Court justices, and all provincial- and district-level officials. Although parliament occasionally emerged as a veto player, rejecting ministerial appointments and even budgets, it never managed to

play a constructive role in Afghan society – largely because viable alternatives to political parties, frozen out of politics as they were, never developed.

The country's first presidential election, won by Interim President Karzai, took place in 2004. Karzai recognized that to build some sense of national unity – and weaken potential rivals – he would need to bring former *mujahideen* commanders into the government, so he used his extensive appointment powers to give them important positions: Ismail Khan was named governor of Herat Province and then minister of energy and water, a position he held from 2005 to 2013; Atta Muhammad Nur, a Northern Alliance commander, was appointed governor of Balkh Province in northern Afghanistan, a position he held from 2004 to 2018, when he was ousted by President Ghani; Gul Agha Sherzai, a commander from the south, became governor of Kandahar Province and then was moved by Karzai to rule Nangahar Province from 2003 to 2013; and Abdul Rashid Dostum, an Uzbek general from the north, was appointed deputy defense minister in 2001 but was removed in 2008 after allegedly kidnapping and torturing a political rival. Ashraf Ghani brought Dostum back as his vice-president (2013–20).

Many of these figures had risen to prominence from their performance on the battlefield and had reputations for violence. Yet a number of them managed to generate higher levels of development in the regions that they controlled than were seen elsewhere, partly by eschewing the formal rules in order to get things done [4]. Because the “warlord governors” hailed from the regions that they ruled and had a connection to the people there, they often were more dedicated to their provinces and communities than were other appointees who rotated from province to province. Many of the latter developed reputations for extreme corruption, as they tended to siphon off whatever they could before moving on to their next assignment [5]. That said, corruption was a problem among all governors in Afghanistan, not just the rotating ones. Yet despite the corruption of the warlord governors, their success in delivering public goods for their communities is one indication of how a decentralized system would have given the country a chance for better incentives – based in local preferences – to take root.

For most of Afghanistan's modern history, leaders used state institutions to engineer political outcomes rather than to govern the highly diverse country. The post-2001 period was, in that regard, very similar to the past. During the early days after the fall of the Taliban government in 2001, there was a groundswell of support for the international effort and the United States in Afghanistan. The hope for democracy was even greater: After two decades of fighting, citizens were no longer content being subject to a distant government in Kabul. In the end, however, Afghans were served a stale set of institutions that concentrated power in the center, weakened the role of political parties, denied the people a say in who governed them at the local level, and generated enormous obstacles to organizing meaningful political opposition. In short, the new Afghan government and the international community had revived the rotten political system of the authoritarian era and simply slapped a veneer of democracy on it. Although there were civil society organizations supported by the international community on the ground, few made a direct impact on policy, especially not those outside the capital.

The International Effort

The international community's strategy in Afghanistan centered on consolidating a Weberian state, and this rested on the belief that outsiders could help the new government to achieve a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence [6]. To do so, the United States and NATO made a set of assumptions about the way political order should be established.

The first assumption was that unity of command under a centralized government would produce an effective state. According to Weberian ideals, the Afghan state's lack of a monopoly on violence was the fundamental root of its problems. Despite the country's ethnic diversities and the fact that the regions had for years been governing themselves in the absence of an effective state, there was no effort to reform the highly centralized system that had been a source of Afghan instability for generations.

Although the United States promised that decisions about the constitution would be left up to Afghans, it signaled its preference for a centralized presidency. When pressed about the need for a weaker executive, such as a prime minister, or greater decentralization of

authority, U.S. ambassador Robert Finn said that “Afghanistan needed a strong president given all the vectors of power.” When pressed by other ambassadors on the matter, Finn claimed that replacing a strong president with a weaker prime minister “would only lead to endless crises of power” [7]. Thus the United States looked unfavorably upon a parliamentary system led by strong parties, or a decentralized system led by strong provinces, as such a system would threaten efforts to consolidate the state.

Just as Karzai had allowed his governors to work around the formal rules of the game, international donors quickly began to build parallel structures to get around the lethargic and dysfunctional governance structures that they had helped to put in place. For example, the U.S. military created Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) that operated as parallel provincial governorates from 2003 to 2013. PRTs worked closely with the NATO military operations in each district to channel development projects to the provinces. Provincial and district governors had no say in decisions about resource allocation, nor did citizens. NATO worked with a multitude of international NGOs and contractors to implement development projects, which were often in conflict with the military operations conducted in these regions, ostensibly on behalf of the government [8]. The second assumption was that international aid, through the provision of public goods, could win hearts and minds and thus allegiance to the state. To this end, donors poured billions of dollars into infrastructure, institution-building, and community-development projects. There is little solid evidence that these efforts worked, although Afghans clearly understood that the aid was being provided by foreigners and not their own government [9]. Moreover, the provision of aid, rather than leading to greater inclusion, gave rise to a state bureaucracy and myriad ministries, but granted no formal role for citizens to oversee what was happening.

Donor efforts were undermining governance and stability in communities. For example, the World Bank–funded National Solidarity Program, one of the largest and most celebrated aid programs in Afghanistan, aimed to build local-governance structures across the country in order to sideline the informal traditional structures that were already in place and to channel donor aid to communities. In the mid-2000s, when I first looked at the program, it was promising to build social

capital and reconnect Afghans to their government by creating more than thirty-thousand Community Development Councils. Through ostensibly participatory processes, these councils would decide on community priorities and then receive large block grants to solve the problems that citizens identified. My research found that communities with these councils were more likely to have disputes and less likely to be able to solve them than were those without the councils [10]. The World Bank's own evaluation of the program found that governance outcomes in communities with the councils were worse than in those without them [11]. They were ineffective because they fostered corruption and created parallel processes of decisionmaking that undermined longstanding social norms about community governance. Yet over years, donors pumped more than US\$2 billion into the project.

The third problematic assumption was that state-building and counterterrorism were compatible goals that could be achieved simultaneously. Yet even as the international community preached human rights and self-determination, thousands of Afghans in the south and east were being subjected to night raids by U.S. forces and NATO-supported militias [12]. The carelessness of these campaigns laid bare the chasm between the rhetoric of democracy and the reality that Afghans faced [13]. Moreover, although the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction detailed the immense corruption in U.S. government programs – both military and civilian – the United States did not change course or significantly reduce aid. And as the security situation in Afghanistan deteriorated over the last ten years, it became impossible for the United States and other foreign donors to monitor their work in the country. Not surprisingly, then, U.S. funds sometimes ended up in the wrong hands. To many Afghans, what at first seemed to be incompetence started to look intentional.

A final assumption common among both the international community and many Afghan authorities was that Afghanistan's traditional decentralized political order, rich in customary governance and tradition, was anathema to the normative underpinnings of a modern state, such as gender equality and formal democracy. At the community level, Afghanistan maintained a robust system of informal governance that provided a range of public goods and services, and – most importantly –

a forum for communities to deliberate on issues of common concern. Most typically, these were organizations rooted in custom, such as *shura* or *jirga* (community councils), and led by community leaders known as *maliks*, *arbabs*, or *wakils* [14].

Through decades of war, customary authority proved strong and resilient, reinventing itself rather than withering away [15]. In villages across the country, communities began to demand more of their customary leaders, who in turn adapted to meet citizen demands. Trust in customary authorities was highest, and surpassed trust in other authorities in the country, at the apogee of U.S. state-building efforts [16]. In Herat Province in 2007, for example, I found a community that was electing its traditional leaders via secret ballot. This was ironic given that after 2001, citizens were never granted the opportunity to elect their formal local leaders, who were all appointed by Kabul. I even found women who had climbed the ranks of traditional authority structures. Yet rather than create space for these customary bodies that were actually engaging in democratic practices, the international community instead intentionally sought to undermine customary authority – for example, with the creation of the National Solidarity Program – to allow for greater state control over society.

Land reform is another example. Donor programs sought to help Afghans obtain legal titles. When offered the opportunity to do so, however, few Afghans took it because the government had not promised meaningful reform of property governance, which was so bad that for some, even the Taliban was an improvement [17]. The vast majority of Afghans held customary legal titles and were unwilling to trade them in for deeds backed by a state that they did not trust.

The country's recently resurrected formal bureaucratic structures were inherently dysfunctional, as they had been designed for authoritarian rule. For example, the public-finance system gave provinces and districts almost no say in spending decisions. Instead, these decisions were all made in Kabul by distant authorities who were not accountable to citizens at the local level. Moreover, the budgetary system – a relic of the Soviet era – was not working. Donors therefore spent significant resources trying to fix it. I saw Western consulting companies get paid millions of dollars to train Afghans on its implementation. But no amount of technical

assistance could have made a system based on a discredited central-planning model work effectively [18]. While conducting research in Afghanistan, I met people who were deeply disgruntled about foreign aid, but felt that the money was not theirs and that they therefore had only a limited right to complain about corruption or malfeasance. It was as if donors had created a parallel universe in order to rebuild Afghanistan that had little to do with the people of the country. Project planning happened in Washington and Kabul, and funds trickled to the local level through often corrupt webs of contractors and NGOs that were accountable to their headquarters and not to the people. Once again, donors had created a rentier state in Afghanistan.

The Isolated Ghani Presidency

By 2014, the Afghan state had almost no legitimacy, and violence blanketed the country as a resurgent Taliban gained ground. President Karzai left office that year at the end of his second term, and U.S. combat operations in Afghanistan came to a close, with the United States transitioning to an advice-and-support role for Afghan forces.

The 2014 presidential election was mired in so much corruption that the actual winner still remains unknown. Abdullah Abdullah, a former advisor to the late Northern Alliance commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, came in first among eight candidates in the first round on April 5. The results of the June 14 runoff between Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani were not clear, however. U.S. secretary of state John Kerry therefore went to Kabul and brokered an agreement between Ghani and Abdullah: Ghani became president, and Abdullah became chief executive officer, an extraconstitutional position created during the negotiations. The agreement also called for constitutional reform, including the possibility of greater decentralization through the convening of a new Constitutional Loya Jirga, but neither ever happened.

Ghani had campaigned on his technocratic bona fides. He promised to reform the government, strengthen the public sector, and tackle other key challenges. His rule was met with great enthusiasm from Washington, who saw Ghani as someone who could relate to the international donor community and U.S. patrons far better than had Karzai, whose relationship

with the United States had soured over Karzai's dissatisfaction with civilian casualties and U.S. outrage at corruption.

Ghani, together with Clare Lockhart, had founded the Institute for State Effectiveness, a Washington-based NGO, in 2006, and penned *Fixing Failed States* (2008) [19]. The book's guidance, however, is ill-suited to Afghanistan, focusing almost entirely on technical issues such as budgets and procurement while saying little about how to build legitimacy or address people's everyday challenges.

Ghani appointed many women and young people to important ministerial and government positions, impressing the United States and NATO partners and giving young Afghans hope that he would sideline the warlords who had been so prominent in Karzai's government and usher in wider changes. Ghani would disappoint those hopes. For example, although he initially tolerated public protest, when it reached his doorstep he clamped down. Beginning in late 2015, a number of Afghan youth movements formed and, during the next two years, staged protests over various issues, including ethnic discrimination against the Hazara minority. In May 2017, after a truck bomb killed more than 150 people in a Kabul square, an organized rally of frustrated citizens marched toward the presidential palace. When they came face to face with security forces, the protesters were fired upon and at least six of them died [20]. Shortly after, Ghani proclaimed that the demonstrations "harmed public order and the economy" and put restrictions on the freedom of association in apparent violation of the constitution. Many of the young people who had enthusiastically supported the president early on now no longer backed him.

Ghani repeated the mistake of so many Afghan leaders before him who were ultimately chased out of power. He centralized control in order to speedily realize his vision of reform. But by doing so, the president alienated almost everyone around him, including the people. Ghani's tendency toward "overcentralization and micromanagement" severely damaged the Ministry of Finance [21]. His overbearing management style led to increased accusations of corruption and the resignation of key ministry staff.

Rather than strengthening state institutions, Ghani again mimicked his predecessors, creating parallel bodies and decisionmaking

mechanisms to get around the levers of government. For example, he created presidential commissions that answered to him on issues such as procurement. Critics charged that Ghani was wasting time micromanaging decisions that should have belonged to the ministries. Just a week before Kabul fell to the Taliban, Ghani famously convened his National Procurement Commission to grant permission for a dam to be built in Kunduz Province, even though Kunduz by then was no longer under government control [22].

Ghani became increasingly paranoid over time, which led him to trust only a select few and kept him always maneuvering to protect his power. This had important consequences. The president, a Pashtun, was accused of ethnocentrism. In 2017, a leaked memo from inside the presidential administration appeared to show government jobs being awarded expressly to keep control in the hands of Pashtuns. This was viewed as evidence that a narrow “clique” was trying to rule the country [23].

In addition, Ghani saw regional powerbrokers, many of whom belonged to ethnic minorities in the north, as an obstacle to his conception of a modern state and a threat to his technocratic ambitions. He therefore set out to weaken them soon after he became president. Ghani’s focus on consolidating power over Northern Alliance leaders by removing the Karzai-appointed warlord governors, whom Ghani perceived as rivals, worsened a security situation in the north that had begun to unravel as soon as he came to power in 2014. In 2017, Ghani fired Balkh Province governor Atta Mohammad Nur, which almost caused an armed standoff between the government and local commanders. Ghani replaced these leaders with loyalists, including many Pashtuns from the south and the east whom he installed in the north, often sparking protests and violence.

When Ghani first took office, he recruited talent from the country’s new, educated generation. But as his rule grew more authoritarian, many of them resigned. During his final years in power, the embattled president limited his inner circle to only two advisors, chief of staff Fazel Fazly and national-security advisor Hamdullah Mohib. Together they were known as the “Republic of Three.”

In these later years, Ghani focused far more time and attention on subduing the *mujahideen* commanders who opposed him than he did

either on governing or on fighting the Taliban. Ghani did eventually succeed in defanging his foes. And this, ironically, was his undoing, as the commanders and warlord governors were his strongest source of protection against the Taliban offensive. Thus, as they became weaker, more districts in the north fell to Taliban forces. By early 2021, the government had uncontested control of just 30 percent of Afghan territory. From May to August 2021, district after district fell to the Taliban, many without a fight.

Taliban 2.0? The New Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan

There are many questions about how the Taliban will govern Afghanistan in the months and years ahead. The Taliban leaders themselves are still figuring this out, as they too seemed shocked by the rapid collapse of the Ghani government.

The Taliban offensive was so effective in part because its messaging was crystal clear: It understood the people's grievances. When Taliban forces seized control of provincial capitals, their commanders took videos of themselves sitting in the lavish palaces of *ancien régime* warlords. Upon taking the presidential palace in Kabul, the Taliban commanders posed in front of Ghani's expensive gym equipment. Outsiders largely saw these videos as proof of the Taliban's backwardness. But to many Afghans, the footage exposed the gulf between the government and the people.

The Taliban took control of Kabul on August 15, but it would take three more weeks for them to form an interim government. They appointed Mullah Hassan Akhund as interim prime minister and also named two deputy prime ministers, Mullah Abdula Ghani Baradar (who had led the Taliban's political office in Doha) and Mawlawi Abdul Salam Hanafi (a member of the Doha negotiating team). The movement's spiritual leader, Hibatullah Akhundzada, would continue as the Amir al-Mominin (commander of the faithful).

While the Taliban remained unified as an insurgency, there is increasing tension between the groups that led negotiations in Doha under Baradar, who seem to be more willing to work with the international community, and more hardline factions under the leadership of Sirajuddin Haqqani, the interim interior minister. Haqqani led the eponymous

Haqqani Network, which launched some of the most brutal terrorist attacks against Afghan civilians, the ANDSF, and NATO forces over the past twenty years. The Taliban seems uninterested in moderating its image for international audiences, as twenty of the regime's 33 officials are on the UN sanctions list [24].

While many Northern Alliance leaders fled the country, Ahmad Massoud, the son of Ahmad Shah Massoud, cobbled together the National Resistance Front from his home base in the Panjshir Valley. As it became clear that his forces were losing badly, Massoud tried to negotiate with the Taliban, asking for positions in several ministries and for a decentralized government in which the provinces would have a say in who ruled them. The Taliban rejected these demands, and he soon fled to neighboring Tajikistan, where he remains today.

The Taliban have not consolidated their rule and, for now, are doing things differently from when they last held power (1996–2001). They have not banned women from public life. They are allowing elementary schools for girls to remain open, although they have closed secondary schools and universities to women, a measure the regime says is temporary. They have not required women to wear a *burqa*, nor have they insisted that women travel with a male companion (*mahram*). They also have not banned music or required men to wear beards.

Currently the only internal opposition to Taliban rule is coming from the Islamic State–Khorasan (IS-K), which staged a suicide blast at the Kabul airport during the height of the evacuation, killing thirteen U.S. soldiers and at least 170 civilians trying to flee the country. Dozens of former ANDSF officials once loyal to the government have proclaimed allegiance to IS-K, as it is the only source of opposition to the Taliban.

The Taliban now hold the keys to one of the most centralized governments in the world. As an authoritarian movement, they have no desire to decentralize authority to regions or to allow meaningful opposition. The Taliban have long said that they believe that democracy, as it is implemented and promoted by the United States, is not in line with Islam.

The Taliban leadership seems quite willing to maintain the large government that it inherited from the fallen republic, including most ministries (except for the Ministry of Women's Affairs, which was

incorporated into the resurrected Ministry for the Prevention Vice and Propagation of Virtue). This stands in contrast to some of the Taliban's more minimalist views of government that emerged during its two decades in exile and is a departure from their previous time in power. They are even bargaining with the United States for aid and recognition in return for a more inclusive government. Although the government has some appointees in place, it has no clear decisionmaking hierarchy. The Taliban have yet to decide how they will navigate within the structures they inherited. Thus, enormous uncertainty looms over the country.

The Roots of Collapse

Diagnosing what went wrong in Afghanistan is important not only to understand the country's future trajectory but also to prevent the same foreign-policy mistakes from happening again. Clearly, the government of Afghanistan was deeply corrupt. But that corruption was not rooted in Afghan society or culture. Rather it was incentivized by the rules governing society combined with the absurd amount of money being pumped into an economy that could hardly absorb such sums. By the time the Afghan republic disappeared, almost 80 percent of the government's budget came from the United States, and nearly 40 percent of the country's GDP from foreign aid.

The United States had no clear strategy in Afghanistan. One constant, however, was the billions of dollars in aid that it poured into the country to keep the government afloat. Yet that huge investment was not subject to monitoring or meaningful constraints on how it was used, and this contributed to corruption and ultimately state collapse. Rather than develop a new approach, the United States seemed to bank on resources alone sustaining a government and a military force.

When the republic fell to the Taliban, the United States immediately stopped this aid, devastating the Afghan economy. Afghanistan is now suffering a banking crisis and a humanitarian disaster, as the new regime has stopped paying hundreds of thousands of government employees and famine is sweeping the country. As of this writing in December 2021, no country has recognized the Taliban government.

Corruption undermined the Afghan republic. But that was only possible because the central government was completely unaccountable to

society. It was beholden only to international donors and therefore lacked legitimacy in the eyes of the people. Money cannot win hearts and minds. Gaining trust in Afghanistan did not require vast resources, complicated plans, and sophisticated military strategies. It required treating people with dignity and giving them a role to play as citizens. The U.S.-led state-building effort prioritized strengthening state capacity but did not bother establishing effective constraints on state power. Constraints are the key to accountability. The Afghan people never had a real say over who ruled them or how. The U.S. adventure in Afghanistan repeated the mistakes of so many of the country's earlier overseers, who sought to rule from the center without making society a key pillar of the state. The tragedy is that Afghans were largely left as onlookers, never granted a genuine chance to put their country on a better course, and the future appears as grim as it does familiar.

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