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The Role of Religious Leaders in the Provision of Local Services in Afghanistan

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Abstract

The geography of Afghanistan divides the country into hundreds of individual communities making it vital for the formation of a decentralized political structure. Traditionally the domestic politics of the country have always favoured a centralized form of government, which is no longer capable of responding to the requirements of an increasingly politically aware rural population. This paper explores the traditional power structure of the village and examines whether the National Solidarity Project (NSP), the largest rural development project in Afghanistan, can be a potential instrument in the modification of this power structure. The NSP is seeking to replace the traditional players of the rural power structure with a new elected group, the Community Development Council. In half of the country, in the absence of NGO and government services, social services including education, health and public information are provided by the mosque, whose support is crucial to the success of any CDC initiative. Traditionally the Mullah Imam, or religious leader, was the legal and judiciary body of the village and the other powerful players would need his blessing in order to exercise their power. Teachers are increasingly seen as the main competitors to rural religious leaders, wary of seeing their influence diminish and believing that education outside the mosque will dilute their influence.

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The views contained inside remain solely those of the author who may be contacted at rahmani@policy.hu. For a fuller account of this policy research project, please visit <http://www.policy.hu/rahmani>.

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1 Introduction

Afghanistan is a mountainous piece of land at the heart of Asia. The geography of the country has divided the nation into hundreds of individual communities living apart from each other in barely accessible valleys, basins and hills. The challenge of keeping the nation under one leadership has been a constant political effort for every ruler of the country. Obviously, the country requires a decentralized structure to handle this challenge, but domestic politics of the country has always favored a rather centralized form of governance under strict leadership of Kabul government. Provisions of the recently developed constitution on governance affairs are nothing but continuation of the same ambiguous politics. Thus, the country faces difficulties each time it attempts to move towards better political and economic development horizons. A very small step towards improvement of governance structure in the country would, undoubtedly, pave the road towards future progress prosperity.

Recent wars motivated Afghanistan's traditional agrarian people to become more engaged in politics. Afghans learned how to become holy fighters against communism, how to train Islamist hardliners to blow up themselves against west, and finally, how to twist internationally accepted rules and regulations in favor of their domestic interests.¹ The lessons learned from decades of war drastically affected Afghan's way of thinking on internal developments of Afghanistan. People are no longer willing to be governed under the same rules and regulations that former rulers applied. Ordinary rural individuals are very well aware of broader consequences of the decisions they make for their own small farms. Before they grow their crop they make sure that there is reliable market for their crop at every level of domestic and international markets. New linkages between rural villages and markets bring the formerly ordinary villagers to the forefront of Afghanistan's economic and political development. Therefore, traditional structure of governance is no longer capable of responding to the requirements of the village today. Thus, new forms of governance structures are emerging which are, in most cases, designed and orchestrated by none governmental actors. Reform of governance structure in Afghanistan is therefore, becoming a very high priority for the country.

¹ The author refers to the recent political games around corruption, drug, and traditional ethnic power politics.

Today one can hardly find an ordinary Afghan villager who can not easily distinguish between his long term and short term interests. People insist on their values much more firmly than what they did before the war. Strategic thinking, coalition building, and adjusting political objectives are new techniques that people employ to harness better yields. Therefore, political gains at the village level have become an extraordinary challenge for many politicians in order to secure votes for the next rounds of elections. In the absence of a responsive governance structure, all of the above-mentioned developments can push for establishment of a new form of order which might not be necessarily good for the future development of the country nor will it serve the broader interest of Afghan people in the long run. To the contrary, it might even reduce credibility and outreach of the government beyond major cities of the country.

One of the main differences between rural people and urban people is the level of education, which shapes individual's political preferences. People at the villages level are not educated enough to participate in the new democratic system as informed citizens. Their Islamic believes and economic gains are the only two motivating factors that shape political preferences of rural people. Given these two determinants, only two sets of policies can serve the interest of rural people: Islamic-based governance policies and village-based economic policies. Obviously, any political party that accommodates best the village with more of these two incentives will eventually gain more political support. Therefore, political parties in the eyes of the Afghan villagers are divided into two major categories: (1) Islamic Parties vs. None Islamic parties, (2) Pro-rural economy parties vs. prourban economy parties. In the village people use a very specific terminology for each of these groups. They call the first group "Khadem-e-Deen wa Dushman-e-Deen", which basically means servant of the religion vs. enemy of the religion. For the second group they use the words "Mardomdar wa Nektayeedar", which means populous vs. necktie owners. There are also other titles the people use for each of these groups, which we are not going to go through all. We should notice that for an ordinary Afghan villager Each of these titles carry a lot of messages.

Development programs such as the National Solidarity Project (NSP) lie at the heart of these political games that are currently going on inside rural villages of Afghanistan. NSP is the largest rural development project that Afghanistan has received since long time with enormous financial support from international community. The project is expected to reform the governance structure of the village and replace the traditional players of the village power structure with a new elected group of people called

Community Development Council (CDC). There are, however, very few optimistic view about how effective the project has been in reforming the governance structure of the village. Our initial observations show that NSP has had very little, if not at all, impact on reform of traditional power structure at the village level. *The objectives of this research was to explore the traditional power structure of the village and find out if there is any chance for NSP to be a potential instrument for modification of village power structure.*

2 Research Background

The International Policy Fellowship Program of the Open Society Institute funded this project in June of 2005 based on a proposal that was submitted by the fellow in late 2004. After some preliminary revisions, the project was approved to focus on a comparative study of the role of Community Development Councils (CDCs) versus that of a Mosque in provision of social services in rural communities. Later the primary objectives of the project were modified based on some valuable inputs from the project's direct advisor and it focused very much on exploring the village power structure.

In general three regions were selected for data collection. Balkh province is located in northern Afghanistan where 159 villages were observed. Kabul is a province from central Afghanistan where data for 727 villages were collected. And finally, Logar is a province from southern Afghanistan where a total number of 133 villages were observed for measurement of the variables. Obviously the number of regions and samples for data collection (north, south and center) was not diverse enough to secure a more unbiased outcome. But, it was acceptable given the funding and security limitation that the project faced. It is hoped that the team will expand the range of sampling and scope of the research in a second round of the project to further improve reliability of the quantitative aspect of the study. It is also the intention of the team to redefine some of the critical questions that the research is supposed to further explore.

3 Research Methodology

Both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies were employed to conduct this research. For the qualitative method, direct observations, individual interviews, and focus group discussions were used to gather information. For the quantitative method, questionnaires were developed to collect data to measure variables.

4 Findings (Qualitative Analysis)

Key players in the village power game

The power structure of the village has continuously been changing and like all other aspects of the country has been affected by three decades of war. In different stages of war different players became more powerful. Some times one player became very powerful, but very soon another player managed to maintain the balance. Before war, land lords, religious leaders, and tribal leaders formed the triangle of power in the rural areas and were perceived the most powerful players of the village power structure. After the communist cope some new players like teachers became more powerful than the others, which faced serious resistance of the other groups. During the war with Russians and the aftermath civil war, commanders together with religious leaders got more power because of their critical role in war. During the Taliban period religious leaders once again came to full power and dominated the whole scene by firing all other players. That period was particularly interesting because other players built a coalition against the hardliner religious leaders and fought with them until the removal of Taliban from the power. Currently a mixture of all the above characters struggle for domination of power structure at the village level, but none of them dominate the whole show. This is why reform of local governance has become highly critical. There is a very strong need for a proper reconciliation of all power players to establish a more sustainable governance structure at the village. If not, these groups, based on their past experiences, will try to remove one another from the scene by employing whatever tactics that deem useful to them. The danger, however, is that their competition provides a very fertile ground for regional and international players of politics to employ their conflict in favor of foreign policies. In order to understand the role of each character and the dynamics of their interaction, we will briefly review each one separately and then see how they fit together.

4.1 Tribal Leader (Meshar wa ya Kalan-e-Qawm)

This is a powerful position that is held by some tribal-man in rural areas of Afghanistan, but it is not a village-based position because a tribe is normally larger than a single village. Tribes are settled beyond the boundaries of villages and districts, and therefore, tribal leaders are key players when decisions concern the whole tribe rather than a single village. Still, they continue to be important in the process of decision

making at every level. The position does not exist in all parts of the country except those provinces and districts that Pashtun and Balooch ethnic groups reside. (Mostly in southern and southeastern parts of the country)

4.2 Village Headman (Qarya Dar)

This is like an executive position in the village power structure. Qarya Dar is officially appointed by the district governor. The extent of his power differs from village to village. If he happens to be a landlord, then he is going to be very powerful. A Qarya Dar is typically expected to be the face of the district governor in the village and represents government in all decision making processes, but people, some, time do not consider him important only because he represents the government. It is his secondary face (being landlord, tribalman, commander, etc.) that determines whether he is going to be effective or not. If he doesn't hold another important position in the village, then he is only considered as the spy of the district governor, and he would seek support from a Zamindar or religious leader to maintain his effectiveness and credibility. His main job is to maintain the relationship between the village and the government and therefore, reports directly to the district governor.

4.3 Village Religious Leader (Mullah Imam)

The Mullah Imam is the spiritual leader of the village and traditionally plays the role of the judge, the teacher, and in the absence of a doctor, the role of the village doctor. Imam's power is derived from his religious and judiciary role that he exercises on a daily basis. It is not easy for anyone, including other powerful people such as Zamindar and Qaryadar, to confront an Imam in front of the public. Of course there are some exceptional cases here and there, but in general it is very difficult for people in the village to go against the leadership of an Imam. In cases where other power players want to criticize him, they do it in private and very carefully because Imams can easily undermine their influence in the village. They can simply assert that Mr. X's behavior is not compliant with the Islamic rules and regulations, and that will badly damage the reputation of the person. There are lots of sayings about treating religious leaders. For example, it is said, "Confront anyone you want, but never confront a Mullah". There is this religious consensus called Fetwaa, which is considered to be much more important than a decree from the government in the eyes of rural people of Afghanistan. Once a

Mullah issues a Fetwaa against someone, the person has to run away from the public reaction until he receives blessing of a higher rank religious leader. Afghan history is full of stories about British colonial power using the power of religious leaders to punish Kings and rulers who threatened British interest in the country. King Amanullah who forced British colonial government to recognize Afghanistan's sovereign authority was frequently chased by the religious leaders with strong links to the British intelligence service until the King was eventually ousted from power with the help of a very famous religious leader called Mullah-e-Lang. Religious leaders are the legal and the judiciary body of the village and every powerful person in the village needs to secure their blessing before they exercise their power.

4.4 Village Landlord (Arbab – Zamin Dar)

The village landlord is another powerful person in the village hierarchy which has different names such as Khan, Arbab, Boay, Zamin Dar, etc. but they all refer to the same person, the richest person in the village. His source of power is his wealth. Rural areas of Afghanistan are agriculturally productive and therefore, landlords are very important as they are the stimulators of the village economy. They are considered primary employment providers to the village and in some cases, they are the poppy producers, which links them to the broader power politics of the country. Although a Zamindar is the employer of the village, he does not employ religious leaders directly. Sometimes he offers religious leaders extra incentives to keep him friendly, particularly when they are engaged in some illegal businesses. Landlords become more powerful when they get appointed as Qaryadar, head of CDC, or as the elder of the village. In any case, they never confront religious leaders because that will damage their business and their relationship with their employees. They also play a key role in appointing Mirabs (water managers) and Chak Bashis (Agricultural Specialists).

4.5 Village Water Manager (Mirab)

He is a powerful person because he is registered by the Ministry of Water and Agriculture, and that gives him some kind of governmental face. He has the authority to comment on how the distribution of water to different farms be managed. Based on the amount of water available in the canal and accepted rules and regulations of the village he makes his decisions. In general the Zamindar, the Mirab and the Chak Bashi

(described below) work very closely to plan the agricultural economy of the village. Mirabs and Chack Bashi are heavily supported and backed by Zamindar. Mirab's source of power is his management role over water distribution and that plays a major role in settlement of disputes among villagers over resources. His comments are well taken by other powerful people, such as the Qaryadar, Zamindar and the Mullah, to decide on who is right and who is wrong in water related disputes. Mirab is paid by all Zamindars collectively with major proportion of his pay coming from the biggest Zamindar of the village.

4.6 Village Agricultural Specialist (Chak Bashi)

He is mostly appointed by Zamindar and works very closely with all farmers (villagers) to maximize profit for Zamindar through coordination of agricultural activities and resources needed for each season in a village. This varies in different parts of the country. For example, the Chak Bashi has to decide what crop the village should grow during a certain season of the year based on some variables such as water surplus/shortage, prevalence of new agricultural diseases, introduction of new seeds, etc. His decisions are key for the overall income of the village as well as the profit of the Zamindars. The person is hired and paid by the Zamindars. Like the Mirab, the source of power of the Chak Bashi also comes from the fact that his comments on what should be grown in a particular piece of land impacts villager's life. When there is a conflict between two villagers over land, water, or the distribution of the harvest, he plays a critical role in resolving the dispute by providing his technical comments. The Chak Bashi can also represent the landlord in some public gatherings.

4.7 Village Elder (Mohasen Safid)

Village elder is a traditional role that is given to old men who are widely respected and trusted for their honesty and goodwill. Almost every village has a few of these men who are considered to be the care takers of the village. They play a big role when conflicts arise among other influential people of the village. The most important job that they have is supervision of some key players such as Mullah Imam who are very influential in the community by themselves. They are the ones who appoint religious leaders of the village in close coordination with the Ministry of Haj, Ershad and Awqaf, and this is one of the most critical roles that they have. Other power players including religious

leaders some time refer disputed issue to these people when other major players disagree on the possible solutions. It is important to note that they are not considered to be authoritative people since they are mostly kind and tend to forgive people's mistakes. When they want to enforce some decisions they have to pass it through other village power players described above. For example young men in a village are not as much attentive to Mohasen Safi ds as the are to the village headman or teacher.

4.8 Village Head of CDC (Raees Shora-e-Enkeshafi)

This is a position that was created recently by the support of international community and government through implementation of National Solidarity Project. The position is considered to be powerful in some villages and not powerful in others ,depending on who has occupied the post. Also it exists only in about a half of the country so far. According to a survey of NSP facilitating partners (NGOs) and our observations, in the majority of villages around the country the position is either taken by a teachers (It should be noted that this sends alarming signals to religious leaders and Islamist political parties because of a similar experience during the communist regime) or by religious leaders who are the historical competitors of the school teachers. (further study is recommended in this regard) In some cases, village elders, Zamindars, or Qaryadars have taken the position. CDCs are considered important for the time being because they receive money from the government, and they have the full support of the international community as well as government. Those who have become heads of CDCs are rarely called with their new title if they have a secondary title such as Zamindar, Mullah, Mirab, or Malem. People still consider and refer to them by the traditional name and consider them as their old role has been re-brushed. Leadership of CDCs has provided a very good secondary source of power to those who were already powerful, but not very much power to those who were not traditionally a key player in the power structure. It is also important to note that people do not trust the position so much because they are not confident that the position and the program will continue for long time. Villager hears from other power brokers that the program is temporarily supported by the international community, and that will end very soon. Villagers also receive similar information from poppy business holders about what is going to happen to the power structure as soon as international forces leave the country. Therefore, the power of this position depends very much on how the program and the overall governance structure of the country will develop in the long run.

4.9 Village Commander (Qomandan)

This used to be a very important and powerful position during the war (1980s - 1990s), and is still the case with a few villages here and there. Commanders actually destroyed the whole power structure with their guns and enjoyed 10 to 15 years of unconditional rule in the village. Commanders were less powerful in those villages where other power players such as tribal leaders, religious leaders, etc. were strongly connected to the power politics of the country. According to villagers, in some cases commanders were either sons or close relatives of former key village power brokers. Their position was badly weakened after the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) of ex-combatant by the government with immense support of international security forces. Although, in the past 3 to 5 years the position tend to lose its role in the village, with some poor policies of the government (like reestablishment of militia forces in some provinces recently) the hope is growing among commanders that they can regain their position in the village once again.

4.10 Village Journalist (Dan Para)

This is another interesting role that is taken by some individuals mainly because of their unique ability. These are people who talk about realities in public, disregarding who is going to lose face as a result of their statements. In some ways the role is very similar to that of a journalist. The role is considered important because power brokers take them serious as they don't want villagers to hear any thing that undermines their power. Dan Paras do not have any special source of power except for their skills and/or unless they are supported by one of the key players in the village.

4.11 Village Teacher (Mu'allim)

He is basically village's literate person who takes care of children's education as well as some managerial role form some other key players like Zamindars. He is also expected to speak up about the village problems and interests when delegations are sent to important provincial and/or central government meetings. It is perceived that his ability to advocate village concerns in a more elite type of language is more powerful than the others. The source of power for these individuals comes from people's trust in their knowledge and education. As we mentioned before, during the war some of them were considered the main enemy of religious leaders as they were supported by the

communist government to counter affect the role of religious leaders in rural communities. Some teachers did also join the war against the communist government, but the number of them was much lower than the number of teachers who were supported by the government. That is one of the reasons why schools and teachers are being often targeted by the hardliners. Today, they are considered to be the main competitors of the village religious leaders because of their engagement in education and guidance, which is something that religious leaders want to preserve for themselves. The current policies of the government and international community to support education sector has made religious leaders jealous and nervous about the future relative power of teachers in the village. They believe that once children are educated they do not follow religious instructions as much as uneducated children do. Development of relationships between teachers and religious leaders is important for the future of the country as they both guide people, and if they do not lead towards the same goals, they can easily create further chaos and conflict as they did during the war.

Although, each of these power players have gained total control over the power structure of the village once and a while, none of them have been able to maintain monopoly for a long time. the power structure of the village is formed in such a manner that no one character exercises more power than the other. In fact the security dilemma is clearly visible (accumulation of power causes decline of power). Not to forget that currently considerable efforts are put in place by the oppositions of the government to bring the village religious leaders back to their monopolistic power and if the local governance reform program is not taken serious, these efforts can stimulate power politics and ultimately undermine the authority and the legitimacy of the government beyond Kabul.

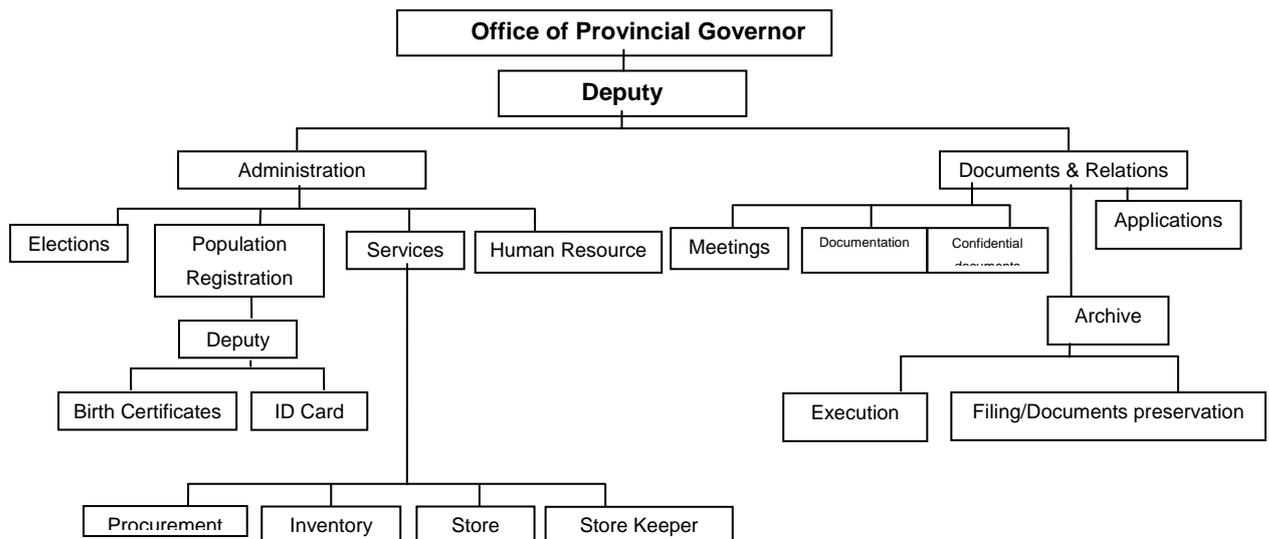
5 Governance reform program stakeholders

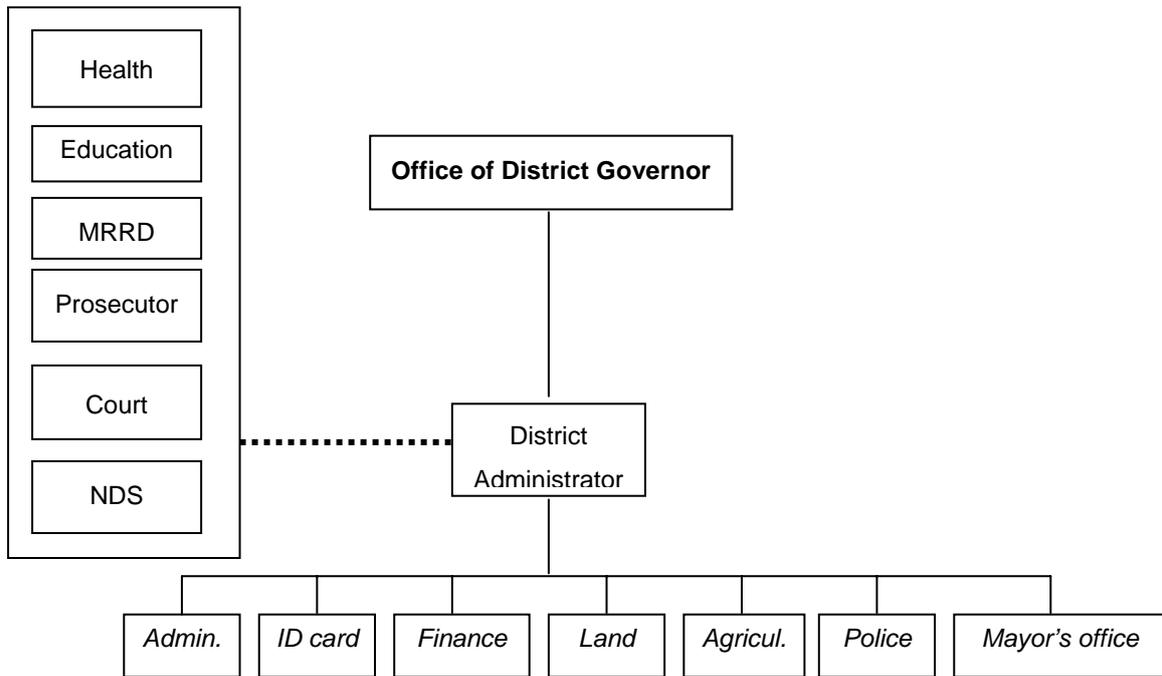
Because of the power politics of the country the governance reform program has become highly politicized and influenced by the politics of different institutions that are engaged in the governance-reform program of Afghanistan. Some key players include the government departments, international institutions with the UN being on the “leadership” role and the political competitors of the government meaning the whole opposition groups.

The current constitution of the country supports a rather centralized governance structure with very little provision for power distribution to the local levels of the country. Within the government, the Ministry of Interior has predominantly been in charge of local governance affairs in the country since it supervises all province and district governors and provides them with the required organizational and financial resources to do their job. Besides that the Ministry of Interior is in charge of internal security of the country and manages the whole police force. The local governance branch of the Ministry is mainly divided into two levels of sub-administrative divisions; the 34 provincial governor offices and 398 district governor offices. (there is serious disagreement over the number of districts due to difficulties in determination of district boundaries) Over time the number of provinces and districts has increased as the government sought to fragment the society to control it better. After the war started, the governments tried to appease local power holders by giving them new units to control. The ministry does not have any organizational structure for village level administration. The two levels of organization are best described in the organizational charts below as:

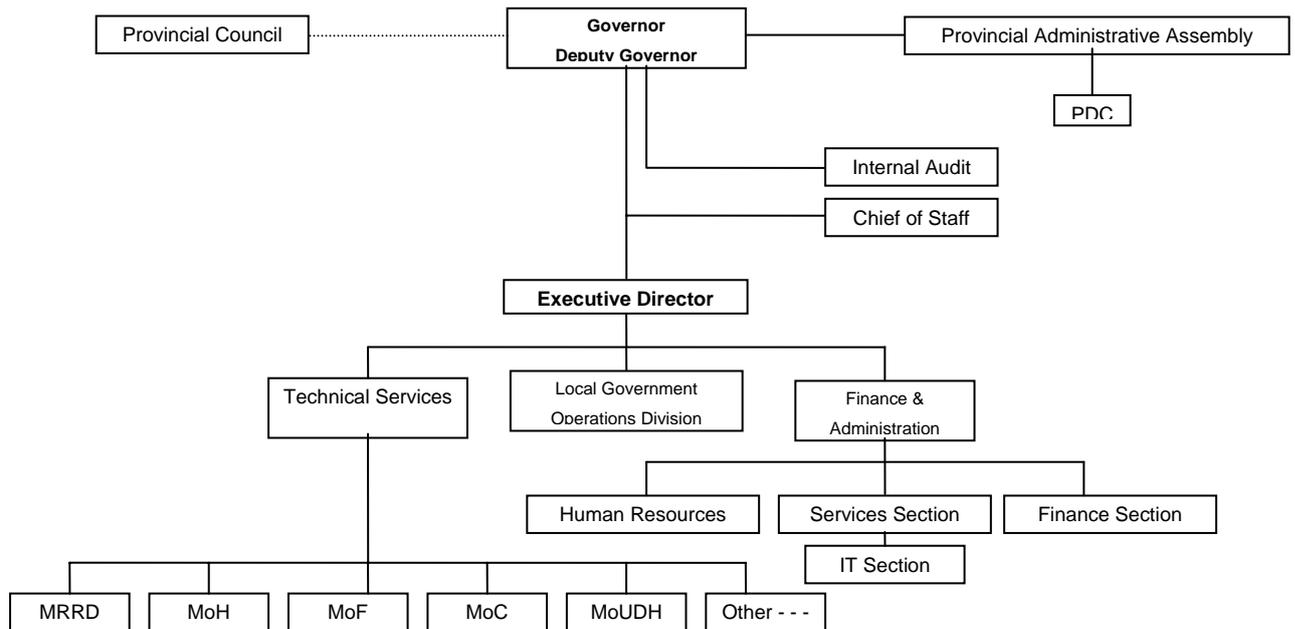
- Office of Provincial Governor and its functions, and
- Office of District Governor and its functions

(Both of these charts describe the current structure of provincial and district level governor offices based on an assessment of the United Nation’s Assistance Mission for Afghanistan [UNAMA] in 2005.)





The United Nations and the rest of the international community worked together with the Afghan government to design a new organizational structure for the provincial level of administration, which would best fit into the new constitutional structure of the country. The process took very long time and finally produced a draft design. Besides the problem of bureaucracy in international organizations and the government, because the issue is highly politicized, policy makers can not agree on a framework for distribution of power. A draft organizational structure that was shared with us by the UNAMA Program Officer is outlined below:



It is also important to note that the constitution does not provide a clear structure for distribution of power beyond the capital of the country and due to funding restrictions, the district level organizational reform is not being considered at this point. This leaves the district level administration with its current structure and, again important to note that there is no administrative structure for the village level governance.

The Ministry of Rural Reconstruction and Development through its recent project called National Solidarity Project (the project is described in details below) is engaged in the governance reform program of the village.

Another stakeholder in the governance affairs is the Ministry of Haj Ershad and Awqaf. (we talked about this Ministry after we describe NSP in the pages ahead) Under different titles, the ministry has existed as part of the government for a long time. However, its main responsibilities have remained to be the same as the following:

- Supervision of all mosques around the country.
- Coordination between the government policies and the religious decrees.
- Provision of religious services to the public including, but not limited to, the arrangements of Pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia.

6 National Solidarity Project (NSP)

Establishment of Community Development Councils (CDCs) has been one of the most recent and creative projects of the government and the international community, particularly the World Bank, to serve several purposes at the grassroots level. The program started with an overall goal of reducing poverty through empowering communities. There is an underlying political goal, which is to connect villages directly through the central government and to use that connection as well as electoral processes to weaken anti-government forces. CDCs are to strengthen social capital above all, by enabling it to cohere around decision making on the accumulation of physical capital (projects).

The objectives of the program are to: (1) lay the foundations for a strengthening of community-level governance; and (2) support community-managed sub-projects comprising reconstruction and development that improve the access of rural communities to social and productive infrastructure and services. (NSP Donor Report, 2005)

The program consists of three major steps; a) establishment of Community Development Councils (CDC) through direct election at the village level, b) training of CDC members, and c) implementation of small scale community projects. CDCs choose projects that cost up to \$20,000, which are implemented with the technical assistance of NGOs and international organizations who also manage the funds. Because of the great needs of communities for economic improvement, most of the funding goes to the small scale community projects rather than governance reform aspects of the program. The International community is very much interested in service delivery capacity of the program because this is the only mechanism available in the country that provides assistance to the villages by involving villagers in the process of problem identification and project implementation. It is also one of the very few mechanisms in the country that has been able to successfully engage women in the development process.

All of the above-mentioned facts motivated the Ministry of Rural Development to spend more money on this program, which eventually created lots of jealousy and political in-fighting for the program. In fact, the program is currently under a tremendous amount of pressure from different ministries to cut down expenses because it is depleting Afghanistan's international assistance budget. However, the hidden part of this pressure comes from the power politics of the country. There are several ministers

who are hoping to win the next round of presidential election and they perceive this program a direct threat to their success because distribution of money by NSP has increased political influence of the minister of Rural Reconstruction and Development. (this is expected to change after the President removed the Minister from his position and replace him with a politically balanced personality) Major achievements of the program to date is outlined below based on the latest information from the official website of the National Solidarity Project:²

Main Output Indicators and Achievements as of 30th June 2006

Result Indicator	Total
No. of Provinces	34
No. of Districts	276
No. of Facilitating Partners' Personnel Deployed	7,021
No. of Communities Contracted for NSP to FPs	17,278
No. of Communities Mobilized	14,042
No. of Community Development Councils Elected	12,614
No. of Community Development Plans Prepared	11,912
No. of Subproject Proposals Submitted	19,383
No. of Approved Sub-projects	19,046
No. of Subprojects completed	6,311

Main Output Indicators and Achievements by Sector as of 30th June 2006

Sector	Total No. of Subprojects
Agriculture	13
Education	1,057
Emergency Response	10
Public Building	21
Health	10
Irrigation	3,013
Livelihood	1,670
Power	2,457

² For more details please refer to NSP's official website at:
http://www.nspafghanistan.org/content/the_nsp_results/index_eng.html

Rural Development	212
Transport	3,464
Water Supply & Sanitation	4,266
Total	16,193

Although the program has created good mechanism to deliver assistance to the village level, there is very little agreement amongst donors and government officials that the governance aspect of the program has had any major achievements. Some even criticize that the governance aspect of the program is not clear and consistent with the country's constitution. The main question being asked in this regard is how CDCs relate to the Provincial and District Development Councils (PDCs and DDCs) that are defined in the constitution. (They are also called Provincial and District Councils) Ministerial officials do not share the same vision for the future of CDCs. Some officials believe that CDCs should remain as representatives of civil society in the village, while others believe that they should be the official representatives of the government. A third group envisions a mixture of both. In order to get the agreement of different ministerial officials on a common vision for the future of CDCs, the MRRD initiated a series of initiatives that targeted towards dialogue between CDC members and senior government officials to define the future of CDCs within the country's legal and administrative system, consistent with the constitution. The dialogue took a week in Kabul where all CDC representatives went through some exercises to define their views and then present them to the President of the country for approval. The exercise did not produce those favorable results, as the President did not approve the main recommendation of CDC members (legalizing CDCs as the official government representatives in the village³). The question was, how can an elected body represent the executive branch? But the hidden reason behind why the President did not approve the recommendation was apparently because the cabinet members were divided into two groups disagreeing on the future of CDCs and therefore, the President did not want to make any decision until there is a common understanding about it. Behind the scene, politics of disapproval was said to be the role that the Minister of Rural Reconstruction and Development is

³ Very recently I have received some reports from the field that provincial governors have sent official letters to the district governors and the villagers saying that the CDC is the official representatives of the government in the village, which means that by now (a year later) the government has approved their request. Maybe either because the MRRD's leadership has changed, or maybe because of some other reasons that needs to be verified. It is also important to verify whether this is a decision by the central

playing in the current power politics of the country.⁴ Certain ministers composed a coalition against further political expansion of the Minister of Rural Reconstruction and Development with the progress of this program and demanded a change in the leadership of MRRD (the coalition finally succeeded in their efforts in removing the Minister of MRRD from his position).

6.1 Some Challenges that CDCs Face

Because of the importance of rural communities in the next round of elections, CDCs are having a very difficult goal to achieve. Their supporters (mainly the government) are not united to provide them enough support they need to confront the influence of other power players in the village. It is going to be difficult for a CDC to grow within the existing context of power politics unless their objectives and roles in the village is clearly defined by the government and accepted by the people.

In some villages where a teacher is elected as the head of CDC, religious leaders are not happy with CDCs and do not cooperate with them. In those villages where a religious leaders is elected as the head of CDC (or as a member of CDC), the relationship that is developed between the CDC and the religious leaders has magnified effectiveness of CDCs. The increased influence of religious leaders in rural communities makes CDCs more vulnerable and incapable of achieving their stated goals and objectives. According to Eng. Tariq Osman, head of NSP program in Khost and Logar provinces, they have even hired religious leaders as their program staff to increase effectiveness of CDC in the village. They have supported establishment of an independent Council of Religious Leaders. "Whoever, secures the support of more religious leaders in the village will have more public support from the villagers", said by several NSP workers in different villages. Rural people of Afghanistan are predominantly traditional believers and they strongly believe that there is only one truth and that is described by the holy Quran. The religious leaders are accepted to be the only ones who can tell them whether their daily behaviors are really in compliance with

government or an initiative of few provincial governors. We are in the process of documenting facts which can clarify this issue later.

⁴ Again, very recently (almost 8 months later) the new cabinet of the government which is presented to the parliament for approval did not have the same minister who was considered to be the source of disagreement. Interestingly none of those ministers who are racing for the next round of the presidential election have taken the position. Instead a politically modest personality is proposed to take the position. This in turn confirms how power politics at the cabinet level considers village level influence a vital part of their political gains.

what the truth says. Therefore, people do not listen to any other officials in the village as much as they listen to an Imam. Religious leaders also know this fact very well and therefore, want to capitalize on that for broader political agenda. They do not easily work for one or the other group unless they are really taken care of. Recent developments in the country such as the murder of religious leaders at the village level by the Taliban are very clear indication of the fact that they are concern about the support of religious leaders towards the new government.

Moreover, the only important instrument of CDCs to expand their role in the village is through the offer of funding for community



The head of CDC with NSP staff and the author on a poppy field right in front of the CDC office

projects. However, those projects do not serve the interest of every single villager as much as other opportunities such as poppy do. Because of the democratic process of project selection and approval, some people's interest will have to be ignored. There is no single project that serves the interest of every single villager in a village. On the other had, the incentive that opportunities like poppy offers is not only more than what CDC offers in size, but also equally and efficiently distributed among all the village members. Rural people know this fact very well and therefore, they cooperate with poppy owners much more than CDC members. Even those who are the leaders of the CDCs and claim to be totally supportive of the initiative, behind the scene, they keep their support with the poppy business because it benefits them much more than what they get from NSP.

Another challenge for the CDC is the funding channel which goes through a bureaucratic and in some cases, corrupt system of the government. Villagers and CDC members mostly complained about provincial MRRD officials asking for bribe before they approve a project. While with the poppy growers, villagers face the power of private market that has no corruption and no bureaucracy. The rules of free market govern the relationships between the people and poppy business owners. It is so easy for a villager to figure out his business with a poppy buyer or creditor in a very straight forward manner. It is should noted here that villagers did not want to talk about their

relationships with the poppy business very much and therefore, we could not explore this aspect of the challenge as much as we wanted.

7 What is a Mosque and How Does it Function?

The Prophet of Islam (PBUH) established the mosque as a center for governance during the early days of Islam's establishment and expansion. Today, in most Islamic countries, mosques perform certain functions that encroach on with what is called modern governance. Particularly in Afghanistan, mosques have been playing a very critical role in the day-to-day lives of Afghan people. This is probably one of the reasons why the absence of the government role was never felt by the rural people of Afghanistan, when governments collapsed or changed. There are three important characteristics that a mosque possesses:

- A holy place; all rural Afghans believe that the mosque is the home of the God. Or in another word, the building is highly respected because of its holy nature.
- A tribune for the religious leaders who guide people towards truce and that will add an additional important face to the mosque as a center for guidance and leadership.
- An institution that organizes and manages provision of critical social services to the village. This role is not so visible for an outsider of the village unless he or she lives in side the village for some time. Many villagers told us that life without food might be possible for them but not life without a mosque.

7.1 The Basic Functions of a Mosque

In discussions about the role of the mosque in a community, different people refer to different characteristics of the mosque as the most important one. Some people think that it is the religious leader who runs the mosque and thus is important. Some other think that it is the institutional nature of the mosque that increase the importance of the mosque. In order to understand how a mosque fills the governance gap in a village we will review some basic functions of a mosque in more details.

7.1.1 Center for Decision-making

This function of the mosque is unique because it applies to all parts of the country without any exception. Rural people consider mosques a place where they can make important community decisions. People do get together in other places for decision-making purposes, but those decisions are not considered final and confirmed until they

are announced through the *Munber* (tribune) of a mosque. This is one of the reasons why government and international organizations always seek assistance from mosques in introducing new programs in rural communities. "It is next to impossible to get people's agreement on any CDC decision unless the decision is announced through the mosque by the religious leader of the village," says Tariq Osman, Head of National Solidarity Program in southeastern provinces. It is important to note that the role of mosque as an institution and the role of religious leader of the village as a person are complementary to each other. One without the other would have less effectiveness, but we should also note that they never existed apart from each other. You can hardly find an active Imam without a mosque or an active mosque without an Imam and therefore, when we talk about one of them, the other one is automatically assumed together. So, to answer the question of "which one is more important?" majority of people agreed that the answer is the mosque. Afghans believe that the Imam is "the light of the religion" while the mosque is "the home of the God". We can clearly notice that the importance of the mosque weights heavier than the weight of the religious leader.

The United Nation's Children Fund Program works through the network of mosques for implementation of their mother-child health campaign around the country for a long time. According to UNICEF's press release in May 2003:

Afghanistan remains a traditional Islamic country where religious scholars and clergy play an important role in the day-to-day life of its citizens. In most communities, especially those in rural parts of the country, imams and mullahs are seen as both spiritual and religious leaders and also a trusted source of guidance and advice on issues of the day. The potential for the religious community in Afghanistan to assist in the promotion of messages relating to children's rights has been taken up by UNICEF, which in May 2003, supported the first national workshop on children's issues for religious leaders from across the nation.

When a message comes out of the mouth of the religious leader inside the mosque, it receives enormous attention and motivates people to pay special attention to that message.

7.1.2 Dispute Management

This is another interesting aspect of a mosque's role in the villages. In every village of Afghanistan, mosques play the role of a court and Imam the role of a Judge. This is where people bring their disputes and seek justice. People do use other methods of dispute management in different areas of the country, but if no fair decision is reached then the ultimate level is the mosque. Although, other power players of the village

remain as part of the decision making process inside the mosque, but the ultimate decision comes out of the mouth of Imam based on Sharia Law or some sort of secondary sources of Islamic instructions. If some powerful people happen to resist the judgment, they have to a superior level of religious leaders and find other evidences of Sharia Law that can protect them. The evidence should come from a higher rank religious leader such as Imam of Masjid-e-Jame (major mosque), head of Shura-e-Ulema (religious council), and or a certified Sharia lawyer such as Mawlawee, Mofti, Qazi, Shaikh-ul-Hadith, etc.

7.1.3 Center for Provision of Social Services

This characteristic of the mosque differs from region to region and from village to village depending on the cultural set up of the community and/or access of the community to other sources that provide social services. In those villages where there are no other alternative sources of social services, the mosque is the only source that provides all kinds of assistance including education, health and public information. This is the case with more than half of the country because NGO and government services do not cover even half of the country's rural communities. In villages where other governmental and/or non-governmental organizations are available to provide these services mosques are the secondary sources of provision of assistances.

7.1.4 Center for Public Mobilization

We call this function of the mosque "public mobilization" because, according to the many books and experts of the mosque, this was the main reason why Prophet Mohammad (BPUH) established the first mosque after his trip to Medina. Islamic scholars who specialize in the Islamic methods of governance argue that there was really no concrete reason to establish a building for prayer since you can pray, according to the Islamic rules and regulations, anywhere you want. It is only the public mobilization and public leadership tasks that required a building and a specific location to bring everyone together. There are many religious rules for the mosque and prayer that have administrative and political bases rather than religious. For example, the obligation to offer Friday's mid-day prayer (Friday is the off day in the Islamic calendar) at a major mosque (Masjid-e-Jamae) is highly political and governance related rule rather than a religious one. Or, in an other example, when you read that It is a rule to build Masjid-e-Jamae (major mosque) only where central market for several

communities exists, you will begin to assimilate the broader concept of mosque. You cannot build a major mosque wherever you want. It has to be a location where people come from many different communities and villages to exchange goods and more importantly ideas.

During Friday's prayer, unlike other prayers in minor mosques, Khutba is delivered (according to Islamic specialists, Khotba is a political statement that every Muslim has to listen to). It doesn't have to be political, but happens to be political most of the time. Khutba is also supposed to confirm who the head of the state is. Before delivering Khutba, the Imam, who is in this case called Khateeb, is supposed to review socio-political life of the country (even if the mosque is at a village level) in the past one week and confirm whether the events were in compliance with the Islamic rules and regulations. At the end, he has to come up with certain conclusions that require people's further action.

In Afghan cities, Friday prayer attendance is not as obligatory as it is in the rural areas of Afghanistan. Educated people in the cities receive country's socio-political information and analysis from different media sources. However, in the rural communities it is the Friday prayer that provides the information and broader analysis. In rural areas Imam is the only one who gets and interprets fresh news from the capital through Amer Bar and Tabligh officers (positions will be described in detail in the pages ahead) of the Ministry of Haj, Ershad and Awqaf. People just listen to his analysis and follow his conclusions. The main reason why the Ministry of Haj Ershad and Awqaf maintains these positions around the country is because they believe that in an Islamic country this is the number one responsibility of the Ministry. According to senior officials of the Ministry of Haj Elrshad and Awqaf, "We are controlling the minds and ears of the public and it is so important to do it properly, otherwise any enemy of the country can use this critical channel and destabilize the country" (Mr. Darwazi, Executive Secretary to the Minister, 2005).

7.2 The Network of Mosques

One of the responsibilities of the Ministry of Haj Ershad and Awqaf is to serve as the hub for the network of mosques around the country. Such network existed for centuries even during the times of anti Islamic rulers like communist regimes. In the recent history of the country the network of mosques were used by many different politicians to mobilize ordinary villagers of Afghanistan for different wars. In every instance the key

role was played by the religious leaders. It is very important for the government to have a better engagement with such a vast and influential network of institutions that is deeply localized at the hearts of the villages and people listen to them carefully. Disengagement with and ignoring the network can cost the country a lot more than the cost of engaging them in the mainstream development process of the country. We chose to call it a network of mosques because the function of the mosque requires close communication between all of them throughout the country. Based on our observations in Kunduz province, the number of mosques that were in regular communication with the Ministry of Haj Ershad and Awqaf on weekly bases was as the following:

No	Districts (Woloswali)	Major (Jam'a)	Junior (Sagheer)	Total
1	Kunduz Center	128	747	875
2	Amam Sahib	94	456	550
3	Khan Abad	42	364	406
4	Ali Abad	24	126	150
5	Chahar Dara	28	202	230
6	Qala-e-Zal	20	174	194
7	Archi	14	156	170
Total		350	2225	2575

We also observed provinces where the number of mosques in regular contact with the Ministry of Haj Ershad and Awqaf was much higher than what is presented in the example of Kunduz Province. According to Mawlawee Abdul Bari Raashid, representative of the Ministry of Haj Ershad and Awqaf in Takhar province, "We have districts with up to 2,500 mosques which were mostly built during the Jihad period." It is important to note that majority of these mosques are not officially⁵ supervised by the government. The mean number of mosques per village turned to be 3.49 mosques per village. The range of disperse is based on a very interesting measurement indicator. The distance between the two mosques is mostly determined by the range of the voice of Adzan (call for prayer). As soon as people noticed that they can not hear the voice of Adzan clearly, they start collecting money to build a new mosque. As per our

⁵ For those mosques that the Imams are paid by the government the mosque is considered to be an official mosque and for those that Imam is paid by the community, it is called unofficial mosques.

observation from three provinces of Afghanistan. The officials of the Ministry of Haj Ershad and Awqaf acknowledged that they have not registered more than one percent of the mosque in cities and districts mainly due to their budgetary limitation. Kunduz province was an exception because few individuals took the initiatives and registered a great number of mosques in every district as part of their personal interest rather than their official responsibility. (Even in Kunduz province, when we double checked the numbers there were higher number of mosques in every village than what was registered by the Ministry officials.)

The reality is that mosques do not depend on any governmental departments for their administrative and/or religious functions. Regardless of the fact that they are registered by the government or not, mosques are all connected with each other for administrative and communication purposes with financial support from the public. The only major difference between a registered mosque and a non-registered mosque is the source of the salary for the Imam. The network is also connected to the Ministry of Haj Ershad and Awqaf even if they are not paid by the Ministry. According to Mawlawee Saraj-ul-Din and Mawlawee Abdul Rahim, Head and Deputy Head of Haj Ershad and Awqaf in Jawzjan province, every district of their province has a District Manager (Modeer), an Order Taker (Amer Bar), a Communication Officer (Tabliqh), and three or four senior Imams (Khateeb). Unofficial mosques are not under direct supervision of the ministry of Haj Ershad and Awqaf, but they are in regular contact with them so to keep the network alive. Nematullah Shahrani, the Minister of Haj, Ershad and Awqaf says “we can pass a message to the farthest corner of the country in 24-hours time while other Ministries with their sophisticated technologies can not do that in a week.”