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## ELDERS AND SHURAS: UPHOLDING TRADITION OR DISENFRANCHISING THE POPULATION?\*

The currently expanding paid ASOP (Afghan Social Outreach Programme) shuras are the only connection people have to an otherwise appointed district and provincial government as there are few if any elected District Councils. However, though they come from an initial pool of candidates put forth by the community, they are ultimately still selected by the government rather than elected and hard to change once they gain a seat. There are also numerous accusations of elders being corrupt, working for or with insurgents, and playing favourites with development money. In some Districts, there are more villages than shura members, so several villages may have to rely on one man to represent them all—even if he is not prone to playing favourites, he cannot be present in all places at once to intimately understand their needs.

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\* The opinions expressed herein are exclusively those of the author. They do not represent the opinions of the United States armed forces, the Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) or its Human Terrain System (HTS). The data for this document has been collected through interviews conducted by the author with Afghan civilians and officials over the 15-month period in which she was deployed in Afghanistan, in the provinces of Khost, Paktika and Paktiya, between 2010 and 2011. The most sincere thanks to the many members of the armed forces, civilians and Afghans for their support and hospitality.

TN: HTS is a programme run by the United States Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) and which, together with the Forces, deploys anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, philologists and regional experts to provide military commanders and staff with an understanding of the local population and potential reactions thereof, in order to the operational efficiency of the Armed Forces, save lives and limit potential civil and military conflicts.

This system leaves many Afghans feeling disenfranchised as they fail to have adequate representation in the local government system. Younger generations are particularly affected, because even in situations where shura members are not corrupt, there is a significant generation gap that leaves younger men feeling that the older ones do not understand or accurately represent their needs. The portion of the population that feels the most left behind and is most resentful is military-aged males, who are also most likely to be drawn into insurgent networks. Coalition Forces' attempts to be culturally sensitive in supporting and helping to fund these shuras only exacerbates the tensions between Afghans and generates ill-will towards foreign forces. Though well-intentioned, continuing to expand the shura system is a poor substitute for rolling out elected District Councils and every effort should be made to encourage the Afghan Government to proceed with the latter.

[United States, Afghanistan, International Coalition, conflict, social structure, governance](#)

## INTRODUCTION

Representativeness and accountability mechanisms are two of the greatest challenges facing the political system in Afghanistan. While the Lower House of Parliament and the President are theoretically elected, the voting process has been built on the basis of fraud, first alleged and later real; a voting process which has also been delegitimised by an effective intimidation campaign carried out by the insurgency and which kept many potential voters away. At more local, provincial and district levels, the issue of representativeness becomes greater, since both provincial governors and district vice governors are political offices, appointed directly from Kabul. A population that is dissatisfied with its local leaders has no immediate mechanism (i.e. voting rights) to demand accountability, so Provincial Governors and District Vice Governors behave more as Central Government agents (Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan) than representatives of the people. To address this imbalance, the Government created the Provincial Councils and the District Councils, which are elected by the people and are supposed to have some influence over those matters falling within their competence. While this may be a good system on paper, in practice the Provincial Councils have little or no real power<sup>1</sup> (most of the people interviewed had never even heard of them) and, therefore, just like the politicians in Kabul, the Wolesi Jirga<sup>2</sup> and even some provinces maintain that current efforts should be focused more on Central Government than on local administrations<sup>3</sup>. In most Districts, their Councils have yet to be elected. Even in Districts they have been elected, there is

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1 Brahimi, L. and T. Pickering. *Afghanistan: Negotiating Peace*. New York: Century Foundation Press. 2011. P. 30; Shurkin, M. *Subnational Government in Afghanistan*. Rand. 2011. Pp. 7-8.

2 TN: Afghan Lower House of Parliament.

3 *An Assessment of Sub-National Governance in Afghanistan*. San Francisco: Asia Foundation. 2007. Pp. 18-20.

growing mistrust as to the dependability and the effectiveness of elections as a means of selecting them due to the high levels of electoral fraud witnessed in the past.

## INITIAL ATTEMPTS: THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT COUNCILS

The temporary solution to the disconnect between the people and the District's Government officials has been to hold a series of shuras. Initially, such meetings of village elders (*mashraan*<sup>4</sup>, *mashar*<sup>5</sup> in the singular form) were fairly informal, with self-proclaimed elders or others who were elected by smaller shuras held in their villages in order to voice their needs before the District Vice Governor. In some cases, the shuras were of a purely unofficial nature and only went to the District Centre when they had already taken a decision on something which only needed to be ratified. Villages often had several shuras, some aimed at settling disputes while others were part of more formal institutions such as the Community Development Councils (CDC). These councils used funds from the National Solidarity Program (NSP), whose purpose was not only to improve village infrastructure, but also local administrations and linkages with the people<sup>6</sup>.

Yet this initiative is just one among many and this has led to the numerous shuras and local initiatives competing among themselves for the same elders or choosing participants who are not true representatives of a village or area. They even fail to recognise the potential impact of such shuras on local politics, disproportionately favouring certain men or families and giving them more influence than they would normally achieve<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, problems and inconsistencies have arisen in the application of the CDC due to their poor monitoring or regulation. In many areas of the Paktika, Paktiya and Khost provinces, villagers reported that there was no CDC in their village and, if there ever had been, they were now gone. This is hardly surprising since it is not uncommon for Government officials from a District in another Province to admit that where there should be 40 shuras, there were actually only 15. Wherever there are shuras, the villages are supposed to pay for 10% of each project, which rarely happens<sup>8</sup>.

4 TN: Meshrano Jirga (House of Elders) is the name given to the Afghan Upper House of Parliament.

5 Being of old age does not suffice to be regarded as an elder, or *mashar*. Only a select group of men in each village have the wisdom, education and impartiality to be named elders, a process which, in theory, occurs gradually as more and more people turn to a particular man for advice or to settle their disputes and that man shows himself to be deserving of said title.

6 National Solidarity Programme of the Afghan Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development; at <http://www.nspafghanistan.org/index.aspx>.

7 Miakhel, S. and N. Coburn. *Many Shuras Do Not a Government Make: International Community Engagement with Local Councils in Afghanistan*. United States Institute of Peace. 7 September 2010.

8 Brick, J. *The Political Economy of Customary Village Organizations in Rural Afghanistan*. Washington, D.C.: Annual Meeting of the Central Eurasian Studies Society. September 2008. Pp.11-12. <http://www.bu.edu/aias/brick.pdf>.

access occurs wherever the CDC operate as they are expected to<sup>9</sup>, though it is not clear what long-term impact their work may have on the development of local administrations, their involvement with the Government or their influence on local balance of power and politics.

In any event, the system is neither sustainable, as it relies on donations, nor does it necessarily oblige local political commitment, given that much of the funding comes through NGOs. Despite technically being run by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, the involvement of Central Government or its supervision of the process does not occur on a regular basis and its actions are aimed more at villages than Districts, its most frequent relations being with NGOs. Financial power is highly decentralised and, rather than encouraging the eventual development of support for a united Afghanistan under the leadership of a central government, it generates conditions in which isolation at village level remains the most characteristic feature of the situation. All a village need do to get its desired funding is put on a show whenever an NGO comes along; a practice with which they are currently all too familiar. Though I agree that a return of power is essential for developing a legitimate government in Afghanistan, villages, especially in mountainous regions, are too narrow and remote a foundation upon which to build an administration. Districts offer a greater level of operation, as they are theoretically small enough to enable most people to be reached and large enough to have officials and be a true symbol of the Government. A responsible, efficient District Government with its own budget would allow the people to take part in the decision-making that affects their lives by remaining connected to a wider political system. Assuming, of course, that the local population involved is representative of the community.

## SHURAS FROM THE AFGHANISTAN SOCIAL OUTREACH PROGRAM

Recognising some of these problems, the shura and the local decision-making process are being formalised, centralised and normalised. The Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP) has been around for some time but is only now being extended beyond the pilot scheme stage<sup>10</sup>. This programme is sponsored by USAID<sup>11</sup> and sets up an official District advisory shura. The members of this Council tend to be the same elders previously involved in Government interaction though they now have official functions and receive a stipend of \$120 a month to cover travelling and similar ex-

9 “Government Takes a Seat: USAID funding has provided a community with the opportunity to interact with the local government,” *USAID*. 14 November 2011.

10 See the US Embassy IPA and USAID Information Memorandum dated 5 July 2010 containing more detailed information on the ASOP and Disarmament and Demobilisation Assistance (DDA) programmes.

11 TN: USAID, United States Agency for International Development.

penses. These shuras commonly have between 25 and 35 members and are divided into three areas of responsibility: local development, security and dispute settlement. In contrast to the CDC, as it is a central group that addresses all important aspects of the local administrations (not only those dealing with development), on paper the shura does more towards creating a working relationship between a District's population and the Government and obliges people to see themselves as a District, not simply as a village. Because many of these shuras have only been created recently, we shall have to wait to see how the dynamics between the shuras and the District Vice Governors and members of the Tashkil (officials) develop over time.

Continuing on the subject of the CDC and what is often seen as acute needs of the communities, the shura will have the greater say on development matters; part of its task consists of drawing up lists and priorities for District projects that may need to be presented in order to obtain funding. Its role in security matters appears limited to making assurances to keep the peace and to support both the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and the coalition forces in the apprehension of suspects. These prove to be no more than hollow promises half the time, but this attitude may change thanks to community watch schemes and gradual improvements in policing. Disputes are nearly always settled within the villages, but when a dispute is brought to the District Centres, the members of the shura and the District Vice Governor (or judge, if there is one in the tashkil<sup>12</sup>) deal with it, depending on the case at hand. Given that all members of the shura come from the same group of respectable elders chosen by their communities for their honesty, wisdom and impartiality, this is an area where they must develop into a major local authority. These ASOP shuras are only a temporary solution that must be either dissolved or integrated into District Councils that are formally elected, if and when they ever are.



r: "Of course the elders understand what everyone in the village needs...well...more or less. Maybe not".

12 TN: the term *tashkil* refers to "appropriation earmarked" for a specific service.

The advantage of receiving a stipend is that the money (or its possible retention) acts as a forcing mechanism to ensure that the elders really attend and take part in the governing process on a regular basis. When informal shuras were formed, getting elders to come to the District Centre was sometimes problematic. However, and despite this initiative, even in provinces where the programme has been set up, not all districts have been able to create shuras of this kind. In some cases, it is because the districts themselves are not officially recognised as such and therefore receive no funding (Gerda, Serai, Paktiya for instance), whereas in others it is down to successful intimidation by the insurgency and the fact that villagers are afraid of being associated with the Government in some way (as happens, for example, in Shamal, Khost).

Wherever shuras like these arise, elders get their positions through a variety of steps. The villages first choose a group of representatives to accompany the District Vice Governor to the Provincial Centre. Some 200 of these men are brought together, then the District Vice Governor and the Provincial Governor select 35 of them to be members of the Shura. In theory, this process gives the whole District population a voice; maybe the elders are not elected per se, but given that the original group was chosen by the people, the elders are to some extent accountable to the people and thus act as middlemen in the patron-client relations<sup>13</sup> that develop whenever someone from the area acquires a certain level of power. If villagers have a problem or need certain kinds of development projects, they can go to the elders from their village or a nearby one. They are able to visit and interact with these elders at home, rather than having to go to the District Center, which, again theoretically, extends the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan right into villages and makes the government personable and accessible. Most people say that, while they know they can go to the District Vice Governor on their own to sort out any issues, unless it involves something of minor importance such as getting an ID document, they think it is more appropriate to go through the shura elders. Though some may complain about this, they hesitate when offered the chance to break this protocol.

As they are both confirmed and paid by Central Government (or their authorities), once elders become official, it is not easy to replace them, at least for the general population. Government officials have the final say as to which members of the original group are to be selected for the shura, thus giving rise to yet another level for developing favouritism and nepotism. It is easier for a District or Provincial Governor to remove an elder than for the villagers whom they are supposed to represent. This means that members of a shura are ultimately more accountable to local Government authorities than to the people. The programme's high level of design was based on the assumption that people would find it easier to rely on the "traditional" system of elders than accept a new system based on elections, providing there was assurance that only honest, responsible people would be chosen to represent the population. Yet despite the designers' good intentions and although many elders were doubtless honest and worked on behalf of their communities, it was a breeding ground for abuse and corruption.

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<sup>13</sup> TN: *Patron-clientelism* or political patronage is the foundation of political-administrative relations in Afghanistan.

## The elders are a bunch of thieves

The first time I heard complaints about the district shuras and elders system, I was surprised. I had simply asked how many elders the village had in the district shura, when the person I was interviewing launched a diatribe accusing the elders of being thieves and of only working for their own benefit, amassing the funds assigned to community development projects. I was shocked, though it wasn't to be the last time I heard such comments. Some expressed understanding of the aforementioned corruption, saying that these elders had always lived in a war situation in which they had had to fight for every small edge to stay ahead of the game. Therefore, it seemed reasonable that they would do everything in their power to ensure that they wouldn't go short of anything if the situation got out of control again. Some regarded such practices as commonplace and not at all surprising rather than exasperating. As I was once told by a middle-aged day-shift worker [ours], originally from the Nader Shah Kot District in Khost Province; "You're asking me if the elders play favourites?... There's favouritism everywhere".



2: The Vice Governor of Hussein Jan District visiting elders and youths from Nader Shah Kot District (escorted by coalition forces).

However, it is difficult to know whether the accusations of corruption and misappropriation of development funds are well founded. Of course there is favouritism, since elders will do whatever they can to ensure their villages receive projects, sometimes at the expense of others. This practice was not limited to elders and the shura, but extended to District Vice Governors as well as provincial and national figures. The

fight against corruption is an uphill struggle, though it is hard to determine its scope or to what degree the accusations are the result of misunderstandings. For instance, in the village of Mest (Yosef Khel District in Paktika Province), the villagers accused the elders of keeping project funds for themselves. The elders insisted that the District Vice Governor and the coalition forces had promised them money, but they had never received it. They claimed that the villagers failed to realise or believe that the money had not been handed over, which is why they thought it had been pocketed by the elders. Both the District Vice Governor and the coalition forces had been relieved during this incident, so there was no way to verify who was telling the truth. They probably both were. Similarly, a road-paving project in the district of Spera was slowly dumping waste in the main valley running through the district, destroying what little farm land people have in this mountainous region. I asked many people in different villages why they didn't get their elders to intervene on their behalf, and they insisted that the elders themselves were profiting from the project through bribes, so they were not interested in the problems people may have.

It was often the young people who were most annoyed with the exclusive dependency on elders, believing that these old men were alienated from the needs of a new generation living in different times from them. But such comments also came up when I spoke to middle-aged men, struggling to make ends meet and feed their families. These men were frustrated and angry, needing robustness and support from their government, but finding themselves literally stripped of any genuine means of interaction or petition with the local authorities. A shopkeeper in his thirties who lived in Jusef Khel district, Paktika Province, told me: “we have elders who go to the District Vice Governor but do not do a good job of representing our opinions. But we are not entitled to go to the District Vice Governor ourselves”. A possible solution to this problem would be for the District Governor to visit villages on a regular basis to listen to the every day concerns and issues of the villagers first hand. In contrast, District Vice Governors prepared to do so voluntarily and without being escorted by coalition forces are few and far between, due to the dangers involved. Likewise, those who do are held in high esteem.



3: “It is important to have members of the shura who represent the youth and can advise young people”, said a young “elder” from Mandozai, waving his ID.

The generation gap is an increasing problem in many parts of the country. The cultures present in Afghanistan, particularly the Pashtun, traditionally include respect for elders and put most of the authority in the hands of the older generation. Thus, many younger people believe they have no right to openly question such authority. Yet, in a society undergoing frenetic change, the older generation may no longer be able to provide the useful perspective which they used to<sup>14</sup>. Others now dominate the political-economic scene. Many regret the slow extinction of the traditional tribal system and the authority and consultation models which it entailed, though it is debatable to what extent this ideal actually existed.

Some officials have recognised this growing gap and have either put solutions in place or wish to do so. In Mandozai District, I met a man of around thirty waving an official document proclaiming him to be a District elder. His shura had not yet been given ASOP status, but he had been chosen by his village to represent it before the District authorities due precisely to his young age. He understood the needs of the rest of the village better than others. Similarly, the Governor of the neighbouring Shamal District said he would prefer a shura made up of younger men. He defended the fact that they were younger and that it was their future that everyone was working for, whereby it was more likely that they would make decisions and act more quickly than the older, more timid and cautious generation. Or as a young police officer in Nader Shah Kot District put it: “what Afghanistan needs is not elders, but young people, with an academic education, who really want to help make this country a better place”.

In some cases, the source of the problem is not the system per se, but the fact that the individuals do not have the leadership capacity and legitimate authority they once enjoyed. They are too alienated from reality and show off too much when they have to act. This is said to happen not only with the elders from official shuras, but with all the “elders” of any village. In a village in Shamal District, I asked a man of just over 50 how they chose elders in his village. He scoffed and replied: “every new-born baby is an elder. They no longer have the power to make their decisions happen nor need to come from respectable families”. Another elderly man from a poor neighbouring village said that his village no longer had elders - people went to their neighbours if they had problems instead of relying on an official centralised group of elders arising from agreements. What is worse, I even heard accusations of corruption made against the village's own official elders. The most sinister case involved a man from Mandozai District whose children had been murdered and was seeking a settlement through the District Court. When I asked why the elders had not been able to resolve the case, he told me that his adversaries were richer than him and they had bribed the elders so

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<sup>14</sup> The slow decline of the elders' authority system is a social feature commonly found all over the world, particularly in areas where agriculture (and with it the consolidation of ownership in the hands of a few elderly landholders) is not the mainstay of the local economy. See Smith, K. “Farming, marketing, and changes in the authority of elders among pastoral Rendille and Ariaa,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Gerontology* 13(4): 1998; Spencer, P. (ed). *Anthropology and the Riddle of the Sphinx: Paradoxes of Change in the Lifecourse*. London: Routledge. 1990.

they would not even get to hear the case. It was not the first nor only time I heard that village elders were willing to take bribes in spite of the many traditions demanding their impartiality and honesty.

However, even though the slow erosion of an idyllic way of life may prove disheartening, the impact of such gaps is undeniably destructive as far as the situation of district shuras is concerned. Central Government relies on a group of men who are unaware of the people's needs and who lack the moral authority and responsibility they used to have. Rather than moving forward toward a system of elected officials who answer to the people, politicians have once again placed the power in the hands of a few *select* individuals who are able to block anyone else's access to Government. While the elder may still be a respected figure, they are not the representatives that the people would choose. Yet the Coalition Forces and Central Government's insistence in the use of elders in an attempt to show themselves as culturally sensitive may prove counterproductive. It is clear that in some, even many districts, the elders not only do not steal from their people or play excessive favouritism, but generally work for the good of all concerned. Any form of representation is better than none at all. But the odd bad apples and the perception that young men (and women) have of being formally condemned to ostracism because of their age may be just as destructive to the legitimacy of the shura or any District Council that replaces it. If the possibility of choosing or removing local leaders is not provided for, an accountability mechanism will never be established and the people will continue to be denied their rights despite the Government's claims to be defending all democratic ideals.

Moreover, it presents potential long-term repercussions. It is more than likely that when District Councils are set up, the same men as now will be chosen. In some cases, it may be because of their good work, but in others it may well work out that the Coalition Forces and Central Government have created an entrenched patron-client hierarchy that overrides many of the traditional models of egalitarianism<sup>15</sup>. By giving financial, security and judicial power to a select group of men who many villagers already feel are prone to hoarding to protect themselves, the Government has allowed them to become the sole providers of jobs and resources. To get anything from the Government, normal people must go through this select group which has the necessary "connections" to get things done. As political systems around the world have shown, it is very difficult to get rid of someone once that person has acquired the necessary reserves of political and monetary capital. The power players arising from such power struggles will have an edge and, even if elections are held, it will be very difficult for normal people to take away their power. There is a risk that, instead of setting up an accountability mechanism and creating a responsible and committed population, many people will become alienated, giving them even more reasons to look for other alternatives to Central Government.

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15 Barfield, T. "Weapons of the not so Weak in Afghanistan: Pashtun Agrarian Structure and Tribal Organization for Times of War & Peace," Yale University: Agrarian Studies Colloquium Series, February 2007.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Thus, the shuras, though providing a way to connect the people to Central Government, may be as limiting as they are enabling. Until some sort of effective, regularly-elected and therefore more directly accountable system is put into place at the local level, there is little to no way to halt what will likely be a growing disenfranchisement and sense of frustration with the government. It is more than likely that shura elders will not give up their paid posts without a fight, leaving the people with few options for changing or influencing District governance. The most sustainable solution would be to encourage Council elections as soon as possible to give the people a say *before* too many local figures politically entrench themselves and are able to monopolise the system. While the current electoral system may still be weak and could end up putting the same ones in power again, at least it gives everyone a chance to express their dissent and try to find representatives who better respond to their needs. This will also limit the influence currently enjoyed by Provincial and District Governors when it comes to choosing representatives, thereby combating some of the extensive for corruption and patron-clientelism on that end.

In addition, free elections would allow younger men to hold public offices, or at least ensure that young men and women would have the chance to choose people who better understand and can satisfy the needs of a shifting social environment. Until this happens, ensuring that young men are encouraged and allowed to be representatives of their villages may help to breach the gap and prevent some of the generational concerns. Another possible line of action is to encourage the Government to bring the District Vice Governor closer to the people. Young and middle-aged men (and even the older men if they do not officially belong to the shura) may not feel entitled to go to the District Vice Governor, but if he goes to them, they may feel more encouraged to interact with him. If the District Vice Governor pays regular visits to the main population centres in his District, even the most remote ones, he will create an area of contact with the Government and the people will know they are being listened to. But in the absence of a periodically elected District Council that has clearly defined power and the authority to make decisions, any efforts to change the system will prove futile. In a political system which the people view with mistrust, as being corrupt and prone to cronyism, it becomes essential to find a way to set up a body that provides a true accountability mechanism. Though it may strive to be culturally sensitive, relying on the elders system is not enough. The only way to ensure that the people regard Central Government as their own is to ensure that no one gets left behind or cut off from participating in that government just because they do not happen to be an old man.

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