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Governance Structures
in Nimroz Province

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About the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

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AREU was established in 2002 by the assistance community working in Afghanistan and has a board of directors with representation from donors, the United Nations and other multilateral agencies, and non-governmental organisations. AREU currently receives core funds from the governments of Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Specific projects have been funded by the Foundation of the Open Society Institute Afghanistan (FOSIA), the Asia Foundation (TAF), the European Commission (EC) and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

Acknowledgements

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Glossary

jirga	meeting
mardum salari	"the people's government"—an Iranian alternative term for democracy
Meshrano Jirga	upper house of parliament
qaryadar	village leader; representative between community and central government; maintains communal property; can resolve disputes
qawm	a complex Afghan political and social term which is often too simply translated as "tribe or "clan"; based upon the context in which it is used, it can mean an identity group ranging in scope from family to ethnicity
shahid	martyr
shura	community council
wasita	"connection"; a relationship to someone with power or influence
Wolesi Jirga	lower house of parliament

Acronyms

ANA	Afghan National Army
AOG	armed opposition group
AREU	Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit
CDC	Community Development Council
ECHO	European Commission Humanitarian Aid department
IEC	Independent Election Commission
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
NGO	nongovernmental organisation
NSP	National Solidarity Programme
PC	provincial council
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
RI	Relief International

1. Introduction

Nimroz Province is located in one of the most remote areas of Afghanistan, with little access to central government resources, services or assistance. It is also rarely considered as a recipient province for international aid. With no Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) formally based in the province at present, there is little to connect Nimroz to the priorities of militarised aid that is allocated to other provinces in the country. Nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) are few and far between, and their activities are limited in some districts due to security concerns. Furthermore, very little research has been conducted in the area; for example, it has remained "off-the-radar" in most studies of development and governance issues in Afghanistan.

From April-July 2010, the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) and Relief International (RI) began a small research programme in Nimroz to begin to fill this information gap, focusing on Afghan perspectives of central and local governance structures in the province. It comprised 40 in-depth interviews with residents of urban and rural Nimroz across a demographic spectrum that represents the primary ethnicities present in the province, including men and women, and literate and illiterate people across a broad age range. AREU has a long history of conducting qualitative research on governance and other development issues in Afghanistan. RI has worked in Nimroz Province since 2007, primarily as a facilitating partner for the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) and as an implementer of water and sanitation projects funded by the European Commission Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO).

Afghan perspectives on governance in a province as remote as Nimroz are fundamental to the understanding of how aid from the NSP (a development programme of the central government), for example, is received, and whether it increases the reach and popularity of the government. These perspectives and local priorities provide critical insights into the ways in which local communities function—insights that need to be incorporated into programming if the programmes designed are to be effective and aligned with Afghan needs.

The findings of this study demonstrate a degree of support for the institutions of the Afghan central government among respondents. This is also evident in people's positive attitudes toward both elections and "democracy" more generally. Nimroz is notably different to other provinces studied as part of wider AREU research on perspectives on "democracy," where the word was widely found to carry negative connotations. Having said that, however, there are deep-seated resentments held toward the way in which the government is seen to encourage administrative corruption and toward the existing personalities and powerholders installed within formal structures of governance. Informal structures tend to work independently and provide essential mechanisms for dispute resolution, but are largely detached from the centre.

This paper summarises the findings from the research, focusing on three key themes:

- A background to the province and a view of the current context and how it is changing

- Perspectives on formal structures of governance, and perspectives on informal or semi-formal structures, such as community *jirgas* (meetings) and the NSP Community Development Councils (CDCs)

- Some key considerations which could impact policy and programming

2.   Methodology

This research was conducted as part of a larger AREU study on Afghan perspectives on democracy and democratisation, which was undertaken in five other provinces in addition to Nimroz. The study involved an in-depth enquiry into local perspectives on both local governance structures and democratic means of institution-building more generally. As such, it coincided well with the stated need of RI to ground future programming in Nimroz Province within a systematic understanding of how systems of governance function there.

Methods of data collection

The research team was comprised of two RI staff—a married couple who worked as a team and were therefore able to interview both men and women. Having team members who were already very familiar with the area was useful in that the research has been able to draw on their own knowledge of the setting. It also meant that networks of trust between the team and respondents had already been established in some cases. The team interviewed a mixture of those who were familiar to them and those who were not, in order to mitigate any potential effect on the data caused by respondents' familiarity with RI programmes. The team received an intensive two-day methodology training course led by AREU research staff in Kabul before data collection began. The team also returned to Kabul in the middle of data collection for a mid-project review and debrief. A final debrief was planned, but unfortunately was not possible due to the lack of air transport available from Nimroz to Kabul.[1] However, the team was in regular communication with AREU staff in Kabul throughout the research, and received continuous feedback on the interview transcripts they submitted.

Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted in the form of informal conversations with individuals and small groups (2-3 people). A series of open-ended questions began by addressing respondents' lifestyles and roles within their communities in order to establish a general background. Questions were then asked about decision-making and dispute resolution practices in the respondents' communities. These allowed the team to establish how local governance functions in reality for many people. Questions then addressed formal structures of governance—elections, provincial council (PC) members, parliament and the central government. The final section of the interview was devoted to perceptions of democracy, although questions avoided specific reference to the term "democracy" due to its negative connotations for many in Afghanistan. The interview was structured in this way in order to avoid affecting respondents' answers concerning democratic structures, which they may not necessarily have associated with the word "democracy" itself. Respondents' methods of elaborating the concept of democracy were noted—especially if they used the Iranian term "*mardum salari*" instead, as was common among respondents in Nimroz.

Sampling

The RI team selected a range of respondents as a sample for the Nimroz study, in line with broader AREU research methods in other provinces. A total of 40 qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers, students, *shura* (community

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1   Air transport was completely lacking at the time of the planned final debrief following a plane crash in May 2010. This also prevented AREU staff from visiting Nimroz Province in person.

council) members, shopkeepers or traders, drivers, PC members, and candidates for the parliamentary elections. Respondents were drawn from a mixture of literate and illiterate men and women across different age groups, and represented three of the main ethnic groups in Nimroz: Pashtun, Baluch and Tajik.

The research was divided into two geographical locations: Zaranj City, and rural Kang District. Kang was selected for its relative ease of access, good levels of security, and proximity to the border with Iran. A mixture of villages with and without NSP *shuras* were selected across both locations, in order to gauge the relative impact of such bodies. This was more difficult than first envisaged, however, as most villages in the two areas had been recipients of NSP grants at some point over the last six years.

Following basic principles of research ethics, all respondents were ensured anonymity. As such, respondents in the text are referred to by their gender, profession and general home location—a choice between city, suburb or rural district. The category of "suburb" is used to describe villages located between two and ten kilometres from Zaranj City.

Limitations

Every effort was made to ensure that the methodology used for this project was sound and reliable. Nevertheless, it remained subject to the following limitations:

- The data is not representative of Nimroz Province as a whole, since more insecure areas were inaccessible for research; inhabitants of more stable areas may hold more positive views on the government's ability to provide security, potentially skewing data.

- Trends in perceptions of governance structures and democracy are difficult to detect due to the fact that people's views on the subject are changeable. The analysis in this paper is presented as an indication of *some* of the common themes found to exist among diverse and differing viewpoints.

3.   Background and Current Context

Geographical and historical background[2]

Nimroz Province lies on the border with Iran and covers an area of 41,356 square kilometres.[3] It has not always been the arid desert that it largely comprises today. Indeed, the area—formerly called Systan—was once described as "the wheat store of Asia."[4] In 1815, Mountstuart Elphinstone's *Account of the Kingdom of Caubul* stated that "the numerous ruins which it still contains testify Seestaun [Systan] to have been a fertile country, full of cities, which in extent and magnificence are scarcely surpassed by any in Asia."[5] During the nineteenth century, the area's capital shifted several times and the region as a whole was known by a series of different names. From Systan, it became Qala-e Kang, then Lash Juwain, then Chakhansur, and finally "Nimruz" in the twentieth century.[6] Nimroz became an officially-recognised province in 1964, before which it had formed part of the province of Farah (now north of Nimroz).

Throughout the twentieth century the province has suffered from both flooding and drought. Floods have been related to the sporadic flow of the many rivers that cut through the province. Major rivers include the Helmand, Harat Rud, Farah and Khash Rud. A number of wetlands, such as the Hamun-i-Saberi, divide various parts of the province with swathes of non-potable, stagnant water and reeds. These are primarily used for grazing cattle but have started to dry up in recent years. The effects of drought have sometimes been catastrophic, and have been intensified by the "120-day wind" that affects the province each June.[7] Moving sand dunes are also a problem. According to one archaeological survey in the 1960s these "are constantly active, burying both inhabited villages and ruins, or setting free historic remains hidden for centuries under the floating sands."[8]

In 2000, most of southern Afghanistan including Nimroz was severely affected by drought. Largely based on agriculture and animal husbandry, the economy of the province was almost destroyed. An estimated 80 percent of the population of the province was directly affected, with some districts losing up to 95 percent of their livelihood.[9] The Khash Rud river ran dry in some parts of the province, and both the Helmand River and Systan Lake dried up completely.[10] Since then, there have been efforts on the part of the government and the international community to provide assistance, but these have been limited by the remoteness of the area and increasing instability in the neighbouring provinces of Helmand and Farah. As such, the province continues to suffer from the effects of drought and an acute lack of available drinking water.

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2   For topography and maps, see United Nations Population Fund, "Nimroz: A Socio-Economic and Demographic Profile" (Kabul: United Nations Population Fund, 2004), 20-7.

3   Government of Afghanistan, "Provincial Development Plan, Nimroz Provincial Profile" (Kabul: Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, 2008), 1. A 1973 estimate placed it at 54,336 square kilometres: *Historical and Political Gazetteer of Afghanistan II: Farah and Southwestern Afghanistan*, ed. Ludwig W. Adamec (Graz, Austria: Academische Druck—u. Verlagsanstalt, 1973), 221.

4   Relief International, "Relief International Nimroz Office: Rapid Rural Appraisal Report" (Nimroz, Afghanistan: Relief International Nimroz Office, 2009), 4.

5   Mountstuart Elphinstone, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul and its Dependencies* (Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck—u. Verlagsanstalt, 1969), 492.

6   *Farah and Southwestern Afghanistan*, 223.

7   M. Hassad Kamran and Sultan M. Ahmady, "Drought Assessment in Southern Afghanistan: Kandahar, Helmand and Nimroz" (Peshawar, Pakistan: United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, 2000), 7.

8   *Farah and Southwestern Afghanistan*, 224.

9   Kamran and Ahmady, "Drought Assessment," 7.

10   Kamran and Ahmady, "Drought Assessment," 8.

Map 1: Nimroz Province, Afghanistan

Nimroz in the current context

According to current figures, Nimroz has a very small population relative to its size—around 151,000 people.[11] Its five official districts are Zaranj, Kang, Char Burjak, Asl-i-Chakhansur and Khashrod.[12] The most densely populated district is Zaranj, the provincial centre, with an estimated 23,700 inhabitants.[13] The province is ethnically diverse and is largely comprised of Pashtun, Baluch, Tajik and Barahawi communities. In general there is very little tension between these groups. Nimroz has seen a considerable increase in population in recent years due to the return of refugees from Iran. This may provide a partial explanation for the unreliability of the area's population statistics, as well as some of its more tolerant attitudes toward the idea of democracy as discussed below.

The province is economically dependent on Iran, with cross-border trade accounting for most of local revenue.[14] In part due to its remote location, Nimroz has very few services available to its inhabitants. With only one hospital and fifteen clinics in the entire province, healthcare is a luxury not available to all. Electricity is also scarce—only around 38 percent of the population has access.[15] According to one source, the province's literacy rate is 22 percent (30 percent for men and 11 percent for women). This is perhaps due

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11   Population statistics are estimates and notoriously variable. These are official Afghan Central Statistics Organization (CSO) figures published for 2010-11—see Central Statistics Organization, "Estimated Population of Afghanistan 2010/11" (Kabul: Central Statistics Organization, 2010), 2-3. As an example, other figures cited for the population of Nimroz include 118,000 (GoA, "Provincial Development Plan," 1) and 272,000 (RI, "Rapid Rural Appraisal," 3). The variance in this case could be largely the result of refugee movement across the Afghan-Iranian border.

12   GoA, "Provincial Development Plan," 1-2.

13   See CSO, "Estimated Population of Afghanistan."

14   This can be in both licit and illicit forms of trade. See RI, "Rapid Rural Appraisal," 4.

15   GoA, "Provincial Development Plan," 4.

to its limited and thinly-spread network of schools—56 primary, six secondary and one teacher training college.[16] However, by far the most significant resource deficiency is that of drinking water. Very few inhabitants have access to clean water and even then this tends to be on an irregular basis. In interviews, the most common complaint of respondents was the paucity of water; given the province's susceptibility to drought in recent years, this is a serious problem. Restoration work on the Kamal Khan Dam is greatly needed but is yet to commence,[17] largely as a result of a political stalemate with Iran over the provision of water on both sides of the border.

Security has been problematic in Nimroz in 2010—a suicide attack on its PC building in May killed three people, including a female PC member.[18] This attack was unusual in its scale as very few attacks of similar size and intensity have been conducted in the region. The most insecure area of the province is Khash Rod District, which borders both Helmand and Farah Provinces and has seen a spillover of insurgent activity from these areas. The border with Iran near to the provincial centre of Zaranj is also problematic due to the trafficking of narcotics and people. Significantly, at the time of writing there is no permanent International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) base in Nimroz Province and a limited Afghan National Army (ANA) presence. This may go some way toward explaining the infrequency and generally small-scale nature of attacks in the area despite its proximity to centres of insurgent activity. The lack of foreign troop presence may contribute to how local residents perceive the perpetrators of such attacks, whom they often refer to as "the enemies of Afghanistan." Residents often imply that Iran in particular has something to do with the attacks. This is markedly different to other provinces, where blame is generally assigned either to the government or to coalition forces. When people talked about Gul Makai—the PC member killed in the suicide attack in May—they referred to her with the prefix of *shahid* (martyr), as the following quotation illustrates:

> *The previous members of the provincial council didn't do anything for the people. Only Gul Makai was good—she loved the country and she worked for marginalised people in society, but the enemies of Afghanistan made her a martyr.*

> — Male 11th grade student

In the eyes of the majority of respondents, her work for the government did not condone her killing. Of course, this is not to imply that people do not mourn for well-loved public figures in other, more insecure provinces; but the prefix of "martyr" is highly political in Afghanistan and is used to denote strong condemnation for those considered responsible for deaths of individuals. It is not used without extreme caution to support government workers killed by opposition groups in areas of the country where these groups have considerable influence.

However, this situation could change in the coming months with the potential introduction of a planned ISAF South-West presence.[19] This may have a significant and negative impact on the security situation in the province, either via Taliban and other armed opposition group (AOG) reaction to the presence of international military forces, or from Iranian-supported efforts to counter a perceived US military threat to the country's border. Either way, this is likely to affect public sentiment toward structures of central government in

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16   GoA, "Provincial Development Plan," 7.

17   RI, "Rapid Rural Appraisal," 4.

18   Gul Makai. She had been interviewed for this study three days earlier. See "Militants Launch Deadly Suicide Attack on Afghan City," *Dawn*, 5 May 2010, http://www.dawn.com/wps/wcm/connect/dawn-content-library/dawn/news/world/04-afghanistan-militant-attack-qs-08 (accessed 9 November 2010).

19   This information gained through the author's conversations with members of ISAF but is currently officially unverifiable.

Nimroz Province. As argued below, existing support for the government—already limited by complaints of corruption and ethnic discrimination—relates to the lack of NATO forces and the relative security this brings. This could change quickly with an influx of foreign troops, leading to the perception of being "occupied" by foreigners, and a corresponding increase in insurgent activity.

Among the main power-holders in Nimroz is the provincial governor, Dr Ghulum Dastagir Azad. Dr Azad is a medical doctor and came to the post in 2005. An ethnic Pashtun, he is generally disliked by Nimroz inhabitants according to numerous respondents of this study. Nimroz has two representatives in the *Wolesi Jirga* (lower house of parliament). During the interview period, these were Khodainazar Sarmachar and Saliha Mehrzad. Preliminary results from the September 2010 *Wolesi Jirga* elections indicate that both are likely to lose their seats. Complaints from respondents regarding these individuals largely centre around their infrequent visits to the province and their lack of ability to provide services.

Political parties in Afghanistan are numerous but do not function in the same way as established parties in other countries. They are largely ethnically-based factions with a history of participating in armed conflict during the Soviet-Afghan war.[20] Few political parties appear to be active in Nimroz, with the exception of Afghan Millat (established in the 1960s and largely unrelated to the jihadi parties) and Hezb-i-Islami. Taliban influence appears to be minimal at present and is largely confined to northern and eastern districts bordering Farah and Helmand respectively.

Table 1: Government representatives in research districts[21]

Governor of Nimroz	Deputy Governor	District Governor of Zaranj	District Governor of Kang	Wolesi Jirga (pre- 2010 elections)	Provincial Councils (as of 2009)
Ghulum Destagir Azad	Al-Haj Malang Rasool	Ghulum Destagir Azad	Ghulum Sarwar	Khodainazar Sarmachar	Najibullah Naser
				Saliha Mehrzad	Haji Mohammad Sediq
					Ghulum Maidin Norawi
					Sardat Abdul Razak
					Haji Mohmmad Nader
					Mullah Gul Ahmadi
					Gul Makai Wakili (Deceased)
					Hajia Rohgul Hiyerzada
					Haji Hirun nesa "Ghrami"

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20 For a comprehensive historical overview of parties in Afghanistan see Thomas Ruttig, "Islamists, Leftists—and a Void in the Centre: Afghanistan's Political Parties and Where They Come From (1902-2006)" (Kabul: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2006).

21 United Nations Department of Safety and Security, "UNDSS Provincial Assessment, Nimroz Province, Southern Region" (Kabul: United Nations Department of Safety and Security, 2008), 4.

4. Perspectives on Formal Governance Structures

Perspectives among respondents on the central government and its various formal institutions including PCs, parliament and elections, were mixed. However, they can roughly be divided into the following themes, which will be discussed below: support for the idea of institutions, if not their current manifestation; thoughts on elections; perspectives on "democracy"; perspectives on administrative corruption and ethnic discrimination; and disillusionment with services expected but not provided.

Support for the *idea* of institutions

Although most respondents were dissatisfied with incumbents of the current administration, there was still a general level of acceptance and value attributed to the institutions of government established (and re-established) after 2001,[22] as the following quotations demonstrate:

> *The provincial council is the first resource for advocacy on the provincial level for weak, poor and marginalised people...People think that the PC is the only worthwhile, legal source of support they have. I also believe this.*
>
> — Female teacher

> *The members of parliament were selected by popular vote because after twenty years, the parliament became active and people believed that they would serve them—but when they were elected they did nothing for the people and people are dissatisfied with them.*
>
> — Male pharmacist

> *This is a new parliament in Afghanistan and its members don't have enough experience—they have some problems and deficiencies but we hope they will solve these as far as possible.*
>
> — Male teacher

> *The provincial council is the people's council, it is from the people to serve the people and to solve all tribal problems, but unfortunately it doesn't have any authority.*
>
> — Female teacher

> *The Afghan government is a people's government and it is also based on an Islamic system, but unfortunately the government does not have the power to hold people to account for their activities…[Researcher: Can you explain a bit more about the people's government?] For example, about 72 representatives of the people collected together to go to Karzai with a petition to change our provincial governor. He invited us to go and see him and we told him that we wanted to change our governor. He asked us, "is there any person among you who you would select as governor instead?" We answered that there was not. He replied, "From where, then, should I find a new governor for your province, since none of you will accept this position yourselves?" After that I knew that we had a people's government which allows freedom of expression.*
>
> — Male shura head

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22 An elected, bi-cameral parliament existed between the years of 1964-1972 under the monarchist regime of Zahir Shah. Presidential elections and provincial councils are however new to Afghanistan and were first introduced in 2004-05.

These perspectives subtly recognise the value of post-2001 institutions of government despite their many faults and the apparent unresponsiveness of their members. While these views were reflected among educated respondents in other provinces included in the broader AREU study, respondents in Nimroz were often informed by their experiences of Iranian government structures as well.

The last quotation cited comes from a local elder who relates a personal encounter with the Afghan president. It is interesting to note how this experience, for him, demonstrated the validity of the "people's government"—the way in which the President listened to the needs of the people and illustrated for them the difficulties of selecting provincial representatives. The emphasis is placed on the behaviour of an individual leader rather than on the formal system of government itself. This phenomenon is common in Afghanistan, where personality and charisma often determine the perceived efficacy or benefits of a given regime or political group, such as a party. For this reason, there is also a tendency to speak negatively about representatives as individuals rather than about problems with the system as a whole.

Elections

Elections were a focal point for many interview respondents. To give some idea of the context in which interviews were taking place; presidential and PC elections had happened the previous year (approximately nine months before the research was conducted). These were marred by a number of incidents, the most notable and widely referred to of which was the instance of fraud in Nimroz PC elections, which even made its way onto national television:

> *Last year's provincial council election was not transparent. There was a lot of fraud and the provincial [governor's] office supported some specific candidates. We can't call these PC members representatives of the people because they printed about 4000 fake cards in Iran and brought them back to Nimroz for the election. I found 180 of these cards and brought them as proof to the people in charge of the elections, but it didn't make any difference because these candidates still used their power to get elected. They represent the governor's house, not the people. Everyone knows about this—this incident of fraud was even broadcast on a programme on Tolo TV, Zang-e Khater. Even now, the person who cheated is the representative of the Nimroz provincial council in the Meshrano Jirga [upper house of parliament]...There are only a few provincial council members who are real representatives of the people.*
>
> — Female PC member

> *In the provincial council election last year there were some existing members and also some new candidates, but about 70 percent of the election was fraudulent. The fraud was even broadcast in the media.*
>
> — Female teacher

> *During the provincial council election, [one candidate] printed fake election cards in Iran. People in our district said that Tolo TV broadcasted this and showed these fake cards on television, but the election commission didn't do anything and the person was introduced as the representative for the Meshrano Jirga anyway.*
>
> — Male teacher

Given the lack of electricity in most of the province, it is somewhat surprising that knowledge of the Tolo TV programme (a comedy which makes a habit of ridiculing

the government) was so widespread—but people talked about seeing it while visiting relatives in Zaranj, or hearing about it from other people in their village. For many, this incident widely delegitimised the position of the PC member concerned—especially given their position as representative to the senate. Many considered the role of the governor's office important in supporting this candidate. Having said this, the occurrence of fraud did not seem to change people's perspective that the PC could and should be a useful representative body, and that elections were the right way to go about selecting representatives for it.

Another theme that was discussed at length in interviews was the comparison between the election in 2009 and elections in 2004-05. According to an overwhelming majority, security had deteriorated significantly between the two elections. The most recent polls had been memorable for threats made by the Taliban warning people not to participate:

> *In the election in 2009 the Taliban warned us not to vote. Because of this I waited until the afternoon and voted as quickly as I could.*

> — Male 11th grade student

> *In the first elections all the men and women in the village went to the polling stations to vote together, but in the second elections the Taliban warned people not to vote. The people of our village didn't go to the polling stations until 12 noon, and then only slowly and after the afternoon prayers; they were afraid because of the threat of a suicide attack at the polling station.*

> — Male villager

These accounts suggest that threats from the Taliban stopped some people from participating altogether. However, the majority of respondents for this study who were aware of the elections said that they had voted in last year's election anyway, and were planning to participate in the coming parliamentary elections (which took place on 18 September 2010). There were also a number of respondents who had no interest in or awareness of elections, although some who had little understanding of the process— perhaps due to a lack of access to civic education programmes or televised debates—had taken part regardless. A number of women interviewed in rural Nimroz said that they had been unsure of who to vote for, and had consulted their husbands or local elders for advice. One widow had even chosen candidates according to their logos:

> *I have voted five times in total [over the course of five different elections], but I don't know who I voted for. One time I voted for a person with the logo of a grain of wheat and another time I voted for a person with a logo of three pens. When I saw the wheat logo I thought, this person will bring us wheat, and when I saw the pens logo I thought this person might serve us through his education. This seemed good to me so I voted for him.*

It is interesting that despite the respondent's self-conscious lack of familiarity with the system, there is still a sense of motivation and determination to participate. Furthermore, the self-reasoning presented by this respondent demonstrates a break from the often-assumed norm of women being told who to vote for. Other women's stories of consultation with male family members or local leaders also involved their taking active steps to seek advice on the subject.

In common with other provinces in Afghanistan, the idea of elections was generally seen as a positive phenomenon by most respondents despite the potential dangers of participating, perceptions of candidate fraud, and the relative decline in the security and integrity of the process since 2004 and 2005. Whether this positive perspective—along

with respondents' ability to separate the idea and potential role of elections from the actual experience of voting—will remain after September's election will depend partly on how it is conducted in Nimroz and whether the Independent Election Commission (IEC) will play an active role in limiting fraud. Evidence suggests that while a certain level of fraud and insecurity is expected, it will begin to affect people's belief in the idea of elections altogether should conditions deteriorate further.

Perspectives on "democracy"

The word "democracy" has negative connotations in many areas of Afghanistan due to its association with Western liberal cultural and perceived secular values—often seen as a potential threat to people's identity as Afghans and Muslims.[23] However, in Nimroz this was not the case, and people talked about "democracy" using the Iranian term "*mardum salari*" in a positive way:

> *Democracy means freedom in the way people live, and freedom of speech. In democracy we should consider the rights of women, children and citizens in general. In my opinion democracy means freedom in all areas of life.*

> — Female teacher

> *It was a long time since I was at school, and I have forgotten a lot. But I know that democracy means freedom of speech, where people can advocate for their rights...For the moment there is no democracy in the government.*

> — Female housewife

> *Democracy means freedom so that people can talk freely and transmit their problems to the government.*

> — Male NSP *shura* head

One reason for this difference between Nimroz respondents and those in other provinces could be the comparative lack of access to television and the media in general. In other research areas respondents balked at the influx of "inappropriate" Western-influenced TV programmes and other examples of the perceived lack of limitations imposed on society in a democracy. The statements above come from educated respondents who do not have ready access to television in their homes, although some talked about visiting family members who did. They are some of the immediate responses to the question "what is democracy, in your opinion?" These were often qualified with a statement regarding the need to situate democracy within Islamic norms and traditions; but with the exception of one respondent, no one talked about democracy as threatening in terms of a cultural or imperial imposition. Reflecting the views of some educated respondents in other provinces, most also referred to the way in which the current government of Afghanistan was not a functioning or "real" democracy, but that it should be aiming toward a more democratic and equal society—one with fewer warlords in power, less discrimination between ethnicities and elections unmarred by fraud.

However, relatively little distinction in attitudes toward democracy was observed between the above respondents and those with more direct access to local media. There are thus two further factors that could be influencing people's perspectives on this subject in Nimroz. The first of these is the province's proximity to Iran. A substantial portion of the wave of Afghan refugees returning from Iran in recent years are likely to

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23   See Anna Larson, "Toward an Afghan Democracy? Exploring Perceptions of Democracy and Democratisation in Afghanistan" (Kabul: Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2009).

have received schooling there, or at least seen how another Islamic country functions as a "democracy" (although in Iran the term "*mardum salari*" is more commonly used).[24] The second contributing variable is the lack of foreign troops in Nimroz. There are very few foreigners working in the province in general, which also has a limited UN and NGO presence. This is significant because the presence of foreign troops in other provinces is often associated with the Western "invasion" or "colonisation" of Afghanistan and the imposition of Western values and culture. For the residents of Nimroz, the prospect of democratisation does not represent an immediate challenge to one's identity as Afghan or Muslim; nor is it currently perceived as opposed to or set in stark relief against the tenets of an Islamic society.

Disillusionment with services expected but not provided

Despite the generally positive rhetoric used to describe elections and democracy in theory, respondents were keen to highlight the problems with the current system and its failure to match up to their expectations of these institutions in practice. This was particularly notable in their critique of the individual personalities installed within the formal structures of government. Across the board in Nimroz, respondents tended to refer to the lack of performance of their MPs and the PC in terms of visibility and service provision. For many, provision of services—either through their own efforts, or by relating the needs of Nimroz residents to the government—was their most important role:

> From our province there are two members of parliament—one is male and the other is female. Until now they have done nothing toward meeting the people's demands, and they only support people from their own ethnicity. From the day that Sirmchar [Khodainazar Sarmachar, one of the province's two Wolesi Jirga MPs] went to Kabul he hasn't met with people from Nimroz and he hasn't told us what he has done in parliament.
>
> — Male PC member

> The members of the provincial council are representatives of the people. They should act as a bridge between the people and the government but they have done nothing.
>
> — Male student

> We don't have electricity, and the MPs have done nothing in our district [to solve this problem]. We have no way to judge what kind of people they are. It seems as though they have done nothing for the people because if they had done something, they would have done something in Kang District as well.
>
> — Female student

> The MPs could not meet the people's demands, and since they became MPs they have never come to the province to ask the voters about their problems.
>
> — Male teacher

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24   In Iran, the system of government is often referred to by its citizens as "*mardum salari*"— "the people's government." The official name of the state is "Jomhoori-i-Islami-i-Iran"—the Islamic Republic of Iran. However, during the years of the reformist president Mohammad Khatami, there was widespread debate about the semantics of "democracy." Khatami argued that Islam and democracy were inseparable. However, due to stiff resistance from conservative religious elites against the word "democracy" itself, Khatami coined the term "*mardum salari-i-dini*" ("government of people based on religious values") instead. "*Mardum salari*" soon became a widely-used alternative to "democracy" in the country's media. This explains in part why more people in Nimroz than in any other province referred to democracy as "*mardum salari*." Thanks to Sogol Zand for her input to this explanation.

MPs do nothing for us, and because of this, the people don't know them and do not like to mention their names...when they went to Kabul, they didn't come back to Nimroz even in their vacations and as we couldn't go to Kabul ourselves, we have little communication with them...[but] still people want the MPs to make sure that roads, clinics, schools and bridges are built in the province.

— Male teacher

I think that our provincial MPs are weak and do nothing for the people. After they were successful in the elections they didn't come back to the province to ask about people's problems. We don't have electricity to see what goes on in parliament, but we see clearly with our own eyes that they do nothing for us here...If the MPs were not weak, why would the budget that was allocated for Nimroz be spent on Badakshan instead? Why was the one million dollars allocated for our province stolen by unknown people?

— Female teacher

Three kinds of expectations of MPs and PC members become clear through these quotations, which are largely representative of the data as a whole. The first is that both MPs and PC members are expected to provide visible or tangible services for the people, and contribute actively to the material improvement of people's daily lives. While it is not formally the job of the representatives to provide services for the people themselves, many promised services as a means of attracting votes while campaigning in 2005 and 2010. One female member of an NSP *shura* in a rural village described an interesting encounter between different local officials, demonstrating a degree of confusion over their respective roles:

The role of the provincial council is like an old carpet which doesn't have any colour. They work, but uselessly, and the government doesn't give any value to their work. I'll give you an example. Once some vehicles came to our village loaded with wheat. The wheat was supposed to be distributed to the people of the village in exchange for work. When we finished our work, we asked the head of the provincial council to give us our wheat. He took us to the governor's office and asked him to sign a letter for this. The governor threw away the letter and said, "This is not your work, it is the responsibility of the NGOs!" We were disappointed, not because the governor didn't sign the letter, but because he insulted the head of the provincial council in front of the people.

In this case, it appears that the PC member was not attempting to provide services himself, but rather acting as a *wasita* (connection) between the village and the provincial government to gain authorisation for service delivery—a role contested by the governor. It does, however, correspond with people's second key expectation of their representatives: that they should provide a "bridge" between the people and the government, transferring people's needs from the village or province to the centre. As one of the above quotations indicates, this role also involves ensuring that the needs of Nimroz are adequately represented in parliament and that services earmarked for the province are in fact delivered as planned. This term "bridge" (as in other provinces) is used frequently to describe the role that should be played by both MPs and PC members.[25] It is often qualified, however, by respondents who complain that their representatives to these bodies are not fulfilling this function due to a lack of visibility in the province.

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25   For evidence of where this term has been used in other provinces, see Noah Coburn, "Parliamentarians and Local politics: Elections and Instability II" (Kabul: Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2010).

This, then, is the third key expectation—that MPs especially should spend more time in the province with the people in order to understand problems and convey them to Kabul. In a province as remote as Nimroz, this is a critical function which MPs—whether due to lack of security, time or willingness—are not perceived as undertaking at present.

Perceptions of administrative corruption and ethnic discrimination

Many respondents identified two additional problems with the nature of representation and the government in general. The first of these was the pervasiveness of administrative corruption, as reflected in the following quotations:

> *There is a big gap between the people and the government, which is getting bigger each day. When someone goes to a government office, it takes weeks for him to finish his work there—but if he gives money to the officials there, he can finish his work in an hour.*
>
> — Male 11th grade student

> *When I want to get my identity card or a copy of my identity card, I have to pay money otherwise it will take a month to get it, and I can't wait that long without working [I need the identity card to work].*
>
> — Male taxi driver

> *You can solve your problems anywhere you go if you have a wasita or if you have money. Compared to personal connections, money is more effective—if you have a wasita then your problem will be solved in two or three days, but if you have money it will be solved in one or two hours.*
>
> — Male NSP *shura* head

> *The people who have power and money in the government abuse this power and money. We can only have democracy in Afghanistan when there is no bribery, when representatives do not abuse their power, when they do not support only the people from their own ethnicity and when no one does anything that is prohibited by Islam.*
>
> — Male shopkeeper

> *In the current government, human rights are destroyed and there is no freedom of speech. The people in government make their own reality with money, they discriminate against different ethnicities and the powerful people abuse their power. This is why implementing democracy is difficult here.*
>
> — Female student

For many, the role of money and the perception that bribes of some kind are necessary to achieve even the most mundane of administrative tasks was an extremely negative characteristic of the current administration. This contributed to perceptions of the government as inaccessible and hostile to those who could not afford to pay for services.[26] This was linked also to the overwhelmingly widespread perception in Nimroz that the government has been captured by powerbrokers and abusers of authority, as indicated in the final two quotations above. It is not immediately clear why this viewpoint was manifested more strongly in Nimroz than in other provinces studied. However, it could be related to the remoteness of the province, which may lead to a feeling of exclusion from the patronage of key personalities in government. It could also reflect

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26   For more on Afghan perspectives on corruption more generally, see Karen Hussmann, Manija Gardizi and Yama Torabi, "Corrupting the State or State-Crafted Corruption?" (Kabul: Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2010).

negative opinions about specific personalities within the province's formal government structures. These include both the current governor, and the former governor Karim Barahawi, now minister of Borders and Tribal Affairs.

A second factor is also implied by the last two quotations cited above—that of ethnic discrimination, or the perception that elected representatives served only their own immediate *qawm* (identity group). It is peculiar that this narrative should emerge in Nimroz—a province which boasts generally good relations between a mix of ethnic groups. At present, one MP is Pashtun, one is Tajik, the PC is mixed and the Governor is Pashtun. Most complaints of ethnic marginalisation come from Pashtun or Baluch respondents, and the latter in particular are notably underrepresented within the central government. Nevertheless, it is necessary to look more closely at the language people use to describe this phenomenon to get a better idea of their meaning. In all transcripts, the word "*qawm parasti*" is used, which literally means the favouring of one's immediate family group. *Qawm* is often used by Afghans in a sense that denotes a group smaller than one's ethnicity and relates more accurately to tribe or wider family. This being the case, it appears that the main complaint of respondents here is the nature of accountability patterns, and that in order to access either MPs or their services it is necessary to be related to them and not merely part of the same ethnic group.[27]

5. Perspectives on Informal and Semi-Formal Governance Structures

Nimroz Province is home to a number of different ethnic and family groups with varying mechanisms for self-government. A sizeable proportion of Baluchis living in the south and east of the province are nomadic and formed into small autonomous *qawms* or groups, led by a *khan*. Structures of social organisation in this case are centred around local *khans*.[28] This research focused primarily on the districts of Zaranj and Kang, where the majority of communities are static and organised around a specific *shura*. However, Baluchi respondents largely indicated that the *khan* system was as established in these areas as in the nomadic communities. *Shuras* within villages include either elders' *shuras* (also called "village *shuras*") and NSP *shuras* (CDCs), in addition to a village leader, *khan* or whitebeard, who often serves as chairman of both. Different leadership structures frequently overlap, with the same representatives serving on more than one *shura*. At the district level, there is often a *shura* which brings together the elders of various villages in the district. This section will explore different aspects of these informal or semi-formal structures: first, the roles and functions of different kinds of *shuras* present in the villages studied; second, the way in which decision-makers are selected on to these bodies; and third, the way in which they are largely self sufficient and have very little connection to the central government.

Roles and functions of NSP and village *shuras*

Some villages included in this study had NSP *shuras* as well as elders' *shuras*, while others only had the latter (i.e. those that were not NSP villages). The NSP has been functioning in Nimroz since 2004, and operates in around 52 communities in Kang District

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27   This is supported by many transcripts but particularly an interview with one man who talked about an MP taking scholarships assigned to the top students in Nimroz Province for the MP's own children.

28   US Naval Postgraduate School, "Nimroz Province Provincial Overview," 11 June 2008, http://www.nps.edu/programs/ccs/Nimroz.html, (accessed 15 November 2010).

alone.[29] In theory, NSP *shuras* are designed as a mechanism through which elected local decision-makers decide how government funds for development should be spent in their area (selecting from a set of given choices). However, there was a certain amount of functional overlap in the villages where both NSP and elders' *shuras* were present:

> *If people want to make a decision about an issue then they collect together the NSP shura and the traditional village shura, which consist of whitebeards and elders. Then they discuss the issue and make a decision, delegating responsibilities to the people. When they make a decision, all the people are satisfied with it.*
>
> — Male villager

> *If there is a problem in the village, then whitebeards solve this problem with the assistance of the NSP shura...when they face any kind of problem the whitebeards come together with the NSP shura to discuss it and make a decision. If the problem is beyond their ability or authority to solve, then jointly they submit it to the district level for solution.*
>
> — Female housewife

> *There was a land dispute between two people, so we conducted a meeting of the NSP shura to solve the problem. Another problem was the issue of public electricity, which was included in the budget of the NSP. The budget was not enough so the shura decided that we needed to collect money from the people. There were some people who were not ready to pay for this even though they had the money, but then the NSP shura members talked to them and through negotiations they were persuaded to pay.*
>
> — Male NSP *shura* head

In the last quotation, it is clear that the NSP shura is taking on its intended role as the body responsible for development projects, but is also charged with issues of land dispute resolution which would normally go to an elders' shura to solve in other communities.

One potential reason for the overlap is related to the structure of the NSP programme, which is largely project-based. When funds are available to a community, the CDC is responsible for determining how they are spent. However, since funds are often delayed and only allocated on an infrequent basis, the *shura* can be left without function in the interim periods. In some areas, this has resulted in the collapse of the CDC entirely, but in others it has resulted in the elected body taking on a broader range of responsibilities.

Selection of local-level decision-makers

Part of the reason for the overlap between functions of NSP and elders' *shuras* is the potential presence of the same individuals in both groups. Having said this, different methods of selecting leaders and decision-makers exist alongside each other. Often, the village chief, elder or *qaryadar* (village leader; manager of communal property) is determined according to family status or education, as the following quotations describe:

> *All the people selected [our village leader] to be the whitebeard of the village, because he was the qaryadar before that, and his father was the whitebeard of our village before him. We are from one ethnicity [Baluch] and he is educated as well. He is a mullah and he knows right from wrong...It's good that the people select their own leader to solve their problems. We also elect the head of the NSP shura through public elections.*
>
> — Female housewife and volunteer

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29   RI, "Rapid Rural Appraisal," 9.

> *[In order to solve a problem] the elders and whitebeards from every family come together and make a collective decision. Then, they inform the people of this decision through the loudspeaker in the mosque...the people of the village select these elders; this is a good thing because elders have a lot of patience. If the youth made the decisions they would make them quickly without thinking.*
>
> — Female student

> *When people face problems then the whitebeards of the surrounding villages come together to make a decision, and when they reach one it is like the people's decision...For electing whitebeards there are a few criteria to be considered. First, their past is reviewed, along with the role their father and grandfather played in the area. People then decide whether this person has the ability to solve problems in the village or not. The third factor is whether they have influence on other tribes in the area. When all these criteria seem to be met, the people are in consensus and they elect him as a whitebeard and give him a turban, clothes and shoes.*
>
> — Male imam

The first respondent makes a subtle distinction between the selection processes for whitebeards and NSP *shura* members, drawing on the concept of village consensus for the former, and using the term "*entehabadi mardumi*" (public elections) for the latter. However, although there is an implied difference here, both are often rooted in consensus among village members despite the more formal mechanism of elections adopted for the NSP *shura*.

The boundaries between formal and informal mechanisms of selecting decision-makers are further blurred because certain people within a given community are sometimes forced into selecting a certain person for a particular post or excluded from decision-making altogether. This is particularly the case with people who are not originally from a given area, or who do not own land and are thus subject to the threat of eviction from their homes:

> *In some areas the decision-makers are elected by strongmen or those who have influence on the people. Since the beginning of the interim government, the heads of the shuras in most villages have been chosen by election. But these elections were not 100 percent reliable, because those who didn't own land and lived on other people's land were threatened by the khan of the village. If they didn't vote for him, he might decide to throw the person off his land—so people were under threat to vote for the khan of the village.*
>
> — Male pharmacist

> *Decision-makers are the strongmen—anyone who has a high position or post is a decision-maker and in order to protect his interests, he makes decisions alone...Influential people elect these people because that is their right...In most of the villages the members of the village councils are the village khans and all the affairs of the village are in their hands. If the village khan is not made chairman of the village, he will not consider himself a khan anymore.*
>
> — Male Helmandi taxi driver

In many villages, there is a considerable degree of overlap between those selected to be whitebeards and those elected to be on the NSP CDCs. Because of this, NSP elections do not always provide a genuine opportunity for leadership change. This is not necessarily a negative factor. As the first set of quotations imply, many respondents are happy with the system and the overlap between *shuras* as long as they belong

to the core group of inhabitants of a village and feel adequately represented. For outsiders or the poor, however, the narrative of exclusion persists. This is important to note given the stated aim of the NSP programme to reach the poorest sectors of society.

Self-sufficiency of local structures

It is significant that in most cases of dispute resolution and community decision-making, respondents expressed a clear preference for determining solutions independently without seeking the assistance of formal governance structures:

> *Elders conduct meetings with each other and share advice, and then they make decisions...This is a good way because the elders can find a solution and we never have to refer the problem to the government.*

<div align="right">— Male teacher</div>

> *I think there is a gap between the people and the government—people live in seclusion away from the government. If there were no NGOs, the government would not exist and so because of this we refer our problems first and foremost to the village shura...The government hasn't done anything for the people and doesn't consider people's complaints. The main reason for this gap is corruption. Another reason is the ethnic, linguistic and regional prejudice of the governmen, which poor people experience.*

<div align="right">— Male high school teacher</div>

> *Problems cannot really be solved by the government offices because those who have money will be successful, or if someone has more power then he will be the winner of a case, and the rights of poor and marginalised people will be trodden under the feet of the rich and powerful.*

<div align="right">— Male NSP *shura* head</div>

There is evidently a lack of trust in government structures—as highlighted earlier in the paper—as well as the suspicion that formal government mechanisms have been used to further the influence and patronage of certain personalities and their immediate circles. There is also a social factor—the more public a dispute or problem becomes, and the further away from the family or village it is taken in order to be resolved, the more shame it brings on the families concerned (this was reflected in data collected for other provinces).30 As such, finding a local solution is generally much more preferable.

This is also related to people's apparent sense that they are only truly represented by those intimately familiar with their *qawm* or village. Respondents in Kang District in particular expressed a notable disconnection between themselves and their supposed representatives in parliament, none of whom come from their district. This reflects a fundamental problem with the electoral system and its large province-wide constituencies, when very few residents of the province feel truly familiar with their MPs.

However, this is not to say that there is no connection at all between national and local governance structures, or between formal and informal structures more generally. One man from rural Kang District reported seeing Nimroz Province MP Saliha Mehrzad campaigning for Karzai in the 2009 elections, collecting people together and encouraging them to vote for him. Furthermore, candidates for formal positions in government will often appeal to local elders and *qaryadars* to collect votes for them. One elder talked about being pressured to vote for Karzai and to encourage all those in his village to do the same:

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30   Data collected for larger AREU study.

I think that Karzai hasn't done much for the people during the transitional and because of that, I didn't want to vote. But the provincial governor, my other friends and my brother tried hard to motivate me to vote, and in the end, I voted. In the second round I had again decided not to vote but my family persuaded me to. In my absence, my friend went to the village and told everyone that I was in favour of Karzai, and that they should all vote in the same way.

Nevertheless, in general the data demonstrates a clear desire among respondents to conduct their daily affairs themselves, entirely separate from the central government. Furthermore, while those working within formal structures of government use informal systems, patronage networks and trust relationships to their advantage, this does not occur in the reverse.

6. Conclusions and Implications

This study has examined popular perspectives on democracy and governance structures in Nimroz Province—an area far removed from the political centre in Kabul and strongly influenced by its proximity to neighbouring Iran. While the area's remoteness has left it heavily underdeveloped and vulnerable to natural disasters, the absence of a strong security presence there has largely kept it shielded from the violence and instability plaguing neighbouring provinces. To a greater or lesser degree, each of these factors have helped shape a specific set of local attitudes regarding the nature and role of both democratic and traditional institutions of governance. Future development programmes will need to understand and navigate the interplay of these attitudes in order to serve local needs most effectively. It is possible to draw four main conclusions from this study:

- There is a base of support for the idea of formal government structures. In general and especially among educated respondents there was a tendency to support the idea of institutions of central government, as well as the prospect of a representative parliament and PCs. People were generally supportive of the concept of elections and the idea of "democracy." However, many saw these institutions as subject to elite capture. Respondents often complained bitterly about perceived discrimination against certain ethnicities or regions within these bodies of government. Respondents also viewed elected officials as favouring people based on membership of their extended family and qawm, rather than on an ethnic basis. Coupled with widespread accusations of power-grabbing and money laundering, such perceptions threaten to jeopardize any faith people do have in government institutions. Despite this, people still express a remarkable acceptance of the process of elections to select representatives to formal government bodies, and a desire for elections to continue despite fraud and insecurity. This demonstrates a widespread support for at least one kind of democratic institution, and for public participation in selecting leaders. However, it is important that NGOs recognise the widespread criticism of central government among residents of Nimroz and the frustration often experienced by communities when dealing with its formal representatives.

- Formal structures of government are not trusted in practice. In general, the communities studied would much rather govern their own affairs than take problems to the district or provincial level for dispute resolution. While this does not mean that formal and informal, central and local governance structures exist entirely independently of one another, it does imply that formal structures are mistrusted and that communities draw upon them only when considered absolutely necessary. Furthermore, those working within formal structures of government are able to use

informal tribal systems and trust networks to their advantage, but local communities rarely benefit directly from such individuals unless they have an intimate, family-based connection with them. Thus, any attempts by NGOs to forge links between the local and provincial levels need to consider this asymmetrical relationship and understand that local communities tend to treat formal structures of government with mistrust.

- Semi-formal and informal structures of government often overlap at a local level. When more than one local shura exists in one village, roles and representatives can and do overlap. On the one hand this can verify the legitimacy of locally selected elders, but on the other it can further reinforce the influence of established powerholders. It can also contribute to the ways in which those who do not own land or who do not have established roots in a particular area feel excluded, marginalized or threatened.

- **The arrival of coalition forces will likely present a destabilising influence.** Although Nimroz Province is relatively secure at present, the situation is likely to deteriorate in terms of both security and livelihoods if and when coalition troops establish a presence there. This is partly due to how AOGs may react in terms of increasing their violent political activities in the region, but is also related to a potential destabilising of the economy. The heavy reliance on Iran by residents of Nimroz for a large proportion of local income and food means that the livelihoods of many depend on a continuing trade relationship with Iran, whether formal or informal. Existing cross-border tensions could be exacerbated by the arrival of coalition forces, which could jeopardise this relationship. It will be necessary for NGOs based in Nimroz to keep a close watch on military developments, as well as monitoring changes in public attitude towards services provided by "foreign" organisations, which may be affected by increased AOG propaganda.

The continual assessment of the impact of these factors is crucial to the effective and safe delivery of services to the Nimrozi people.

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