



# Practicing Democracy in Afghanistan

## Key Findings on Perceptions, Parliament and Elections

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### Introduction

This policy note draws on over three years of AREU research into the dynamics of representative governance in Afghanistan at local and national levels (see box below for details). It is intended to be an introductory guide for donors, programme implementers, educators, capacity-builders and others interested in politics in Afghanistan, and identifies relevant AREU reports for further reading, depending on specific fields of interest. The paper is divided into three interconnecting themes:

- **Perceptions among the Electorate**, exploring voters' views on "democracy" and elections, opinions on consensus politics and its relationship to stability, notions of equality, and expectations of MPs.
- **Electoral Dynamics**, examining how people vote and why, and strategies candidates and voters use to negotiate power during and after elections.
- **Parliamentary Politics**, outlining how MPs interact with their constituents and the executive, political dynamics within parliament, and how MPs manage the costs associated with their positions.

### 1. Perceptions among the Electorate

Afghans generally have a strong interest in how their country is and should be governed. While their views vary, there are some identifiable trends, often widely divergent from Western ideals of democracy.

**Elections versus "democracy"**: There is strong support among many Afghans for people's right to select their representatives through elections. In many people's minds, these desirable aspects of representation are separated from wider connotations of the English word "democracy," which is often seen as an imported system of Western social values and ideals that threatens people's identities as both Afghans and Muslims. Afghans often said that democratisation should take place within an "Islamic framework," where people's behaviour conforms with an acceptable—though rarely defined—set of Islamic norms and values.

**Consensus and stability**: Many Afghans stress the importance of consensus when describing what politics should ideally look like. Citing local methods of community governance such as *shuras* or *jirgas*, people see consensus-building as a more predictable, stable and inclusive way to make decisions than the competitive individualism typical in the West. Similarly, political parties are often viewed as potentially destructive forces that exacerbate divisions and heighten the risk of conflict, due in part to their destructive role during the jihad and civil war periods and the violent competition between different groups they are seen to represent. Especially in less secure areas, many people ultimately prize a basic level of security above all else and are reluctant to involve themselves in politics of any kind should it threaten to disrupt this.

#### About the Research

This summary draws on a series of papers by Anna Larson, Noah Coburn and Mohammad Hasan Wafaey that outline the findings of AREU's three-year research project exploring issues of representative governance. Part-funded by the Foundation for the Open Society Institute of Afghanistan (FOSIA), fieldwork took place in Balkh, Kabul, Ghazni and Nangarhar (in coordination with OSDR), Nimroz (in coordination with Relief International) and Paktia Provinces. It was conducted by AREU governance researchers Farid Ahmad Bayat, Parween Gezabi, Najia Hajizada, Sameera Ibrahimi, Mohammad Asif Karimi, Anisa Nuzhat, Yahya Rahimi, Maryam Safi, Muneer Salamzai, Sediq Seddiqqi and Zahir Seddiqqi under the management of Noah Coburn, Anna Larson and Mohammad Hassan Wafaey. For more information and a full list of papers, see the project's page on AREU's website ([click here](#)).

**Questions of equality:** There is a general demand for equal access to political influence and economic resources. In this respect, many see Afghanistan's current system as little more than a front for existing powerholders to enrich themselves at the expense of the population at large. However, there is a lack of consensus over exactly how representation should work in Afghanistan and views often differ according to people's backgrounds. For example, there is often a sense that the right to represent should somehow be tied to a person's level of education or capacity, and there are competing opinions on whether and how power should be allocated among Afghanistan's different population groups.

### Further Reading on Voter Perceptions

- Deconstructing "Democracy" in Afghanistan (2011).
- Losing Legitimacy? (2009).

**Expectations of MPs:** In many instances, voters equate MPs with other community leaders such as *maliks*, who have traditionally served as a point of contact with the state. This can lead to the view that they are thus bound by similar norms of reciprocal obligation; rather than serving as representatives, they are expected to provide services and political connections in exchange for community support. In a similar vein, there is a sense that only someone familiar with a given community can represent it and be held to account if promises of service provision go unmet. These factors can ultimately lead to the expectation that MPs will primarily represent communities with which they are associated (rather than the entire population of their home province, which is their actual electorate). These understandings can lead to disillusionment when people's high expectations of service provision are not met by MPs, as well as feelings of disenfranchisement among communities without a "their own" parliamentarian.

## 2. Electoral Dynamics

Since 2009's presidential poll, elections in Afghanistan have become the subject of increasing public scepticism and are widely viewed as fraud-tainted, lacking in procedural transparency and controlled by powerful national leaders or foreign actors. However, despite this perception, the process can still provide an important opportunity for communities and candidates to demonstrate strength, renegotiate power and secure resources. This section explores a number of general features that characterise electoral participation in Afghanistan.

**Localism:** Elections in Afghanistan tend to play out in a highly localised fashion, even when it comes to parliamentary or presidential polls. In general, the paramount importance of solidarity groups (often referred to as *qawms* or *khels*) and reciprocal patronage networks in Afghan society means that elections revolve around competing local interests rather than cross-cutting issues or ideologies. Prioritisation of local interests is further reinforced by the tendency to see MPs as direct service providers, since by this calculation a community's support at an election should translate into concrete rewards if its candidate is successful.

**Bloc voting:** Collective voting is a regular feature of Afghan elections, though the precise size of blocs can vary depending on local conditions. While the idea of collective voting may seem at odds with the one-person-one-vote mentality of Western electoral politics, it is a system that offers Afghan communities and individuals better scope to address their own political concerns. In general, this approach is coherent with the general preference for consensus-based politics mentioned above. In addition, appearing to mobilise a large bloc vote is a way for communities to demonstrate their political clout, as well as extract resources in the aftermath of elections from candidates they claim to have supported.

**The voting system:** Bloc voting is also encouraged by Afghanistan's single non-transferrable vote (SNTV) electoral system, where provinces are allocated a given number of MPs who are elected based on the number of direct votes they win. This means that the last few successful candidates in each province can win with a relatively small number of votes. There is thus a concrete motivation for communities to vote unanimously in order to increase the likelihood of a candidate with which they are connected being elected. However, this practice can create problems when scaled up to a provincial or national level given its potential to skew election results in favour of communities best able to mobilise collectively and turn out to vote (which can be highly dependent on local security conditions). A recent example is the parliamentary election results in Ghazni, where far greater voter turnout among the Hazaras contributed to the election of a highly disproportionate number of Hazara

MPs relative to the ethnic composition of the province (which also has a large Pashtun community). This led to high-level political tensions and increased instability in the area.

**Election strategies:** Elections in Afghanistan are where relationships of patronage and reciprocity meet the secrecy of the ballot box; they also take place in a context of uncertain security and widespread perceptions of fraud. Out of these circumstances have emerged a number of election strategies that candidates and communities rely on to secure maximum political capital:

- *Exploiting uncertainty:* The practice of concealing one's true actions from friends and enemies alike is pervasive across all levels of Afghan politics. In elections, this manifests itself in a variety of ways. Secret ballots allow voters to claim to have supported a winning candidate when it comes to the distribution of post-election political favour. For individuals, they can also open a way to vote against the preference of their broader bloc when doing so openly would attract community censure. Candidates also have much to gain by concealing their motives and allegiances. By keeping party affiliation informal, for example, they can gain political or economic support from more powerful actors while minimising voter suspicion. Meanwhile, fuelling or manipulating local rumours can help inflate their perceived role in bringing development projects or other benefits to a given area.
- *Accusations of fraud:* Crying foul allows losing candidates and their supporters to undermine the legitimacy of their opponents. Regardless of how true such claims are, the general belief that elections are rife with fraud means that simply alleging illegitimate use of influence can be an effective political tool. Actors with a large power base can thus demand a proportionate role in post-election politics regardless of their actual vote tallies.
- *Violence:* The threat or use of violence can be an extremely effective political strategy in Afghanistan. During campaign season, various actors may covertly or explicitly deploy violence to sway voters by raising doubts over the stability of the status quo or by inhibiting the ability of opponents or electoral agencies to operate in certain areas. After the results are in, losing candidates can also threaten to take up arms against the government as a way to extract concessions despite their defeat. In insecure areas, a candidate's ability to wield military force can thus have a strong bearing on voter preference, since their influence over security looms larger than others' promises to provide more material services.

#### Further Reading on Electoral Dynamics

- Voting Together (2009).
- Connecting With Kabul (2010).
- Undermining Representative Governance (2011).

### 3. Parliamentary Politics

The Wolesi Jirga (lower house of parliament) is the focal point of representative governance in Afghanistan because it is often the primary link between communities and the central government in Kabul. This section details some of the body's political dynamics, which in some respects mirror those seen in local communities across the country.

**Relations with constituents:** How MPs relate to voters is highly dependent on the political landscape of a given area. As discussed, MPs tend (and are expected) to behave in the mould of existing local community leaders, whose scope of representation is limited. They may serve the interests of a specific community (or *qawm* or *khel*) and in doing so are often deeply intertwined in the networks of patronage and reciprocity that characterise them. In some cases, close ties between MPs and powerful local actors allow the latter to act as gatekeepers, controlling constituents' access to their representatives.

**Relations with the executive:** There is a strong incentive for MPs to forge links with members of the executive (such as line ministries or the president's office). Doing so can open access to a range of resources and services that can benefit both their communities and their own personal interests. However, maintaining these relationships can prove difficult given the shifting nature of political allegiance within the parliament. Unrecorded voting in the Wolesi Jirga allows MPs to vote on most issues without the pressure of public scrutiny, and changing positions on an issue is thus commonplace.

In this way, plenary votes are used as bargaining chips to secure patronage in a manner that can be detached from the public interest.

**Organisational capacity:** In general, MPs' ability to organise as long-term interest groups is weak. As in communities, there is little initial tendency for groups to form on the basis of issues or ideology, despite provisions in the Parliamentary rules of procedure to encourage this. Instead, MPs are more likely to rally around the immediate concerns of patronage networks or ethnic/solidarity groups. In addition, the potentially lucrative sources of patronage offered by powerful parliamentarians and members of the executive mean that many MPs are reluctant to adopt a consistent political stance or forge lasting alliances for fear of closing off their options. This also acts as a disincentive for MPs to tie themselves too closely to political parties, leaving the latter generally incapable of mobilising consistent support. While some groups have been able to form, they have nevertheless tended to fragment quickly due to a lack of funds, arguments over leadership, and the competing pull of other interests on their individual members. Significantly, these factors have also contributed to a noticeable lack of organisation around women's interests on the part of female MPs.

#### Further Reading on Parliamentary Politics

- A Matter of Interests (2007).
- Afghanistan's New Democratic Parties (2009).
- The Wolesi Jirga in Flux (2010).
- Political Economy in the Wolesi Jirga (2011).

**Expenses:** Becoming (and being) an MP is expensive. An election campaign can easily cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, to which is added the high day-to-day expenses of office if the campaign is a success. MPs draw on a diverse array of funding sources for support. In many cases they rely heavily on the communities they represent, which may help strengthen their sense of accountability toward them. However, MPs may also take advantage of larger—and potentially less legal—external sources of funding. These may take the form of business interests, gaining access to lucrative government contracts, or forming patronage relations with powerful figures. In bypassing the need for community support, such ties threaten to fundamentally reshape MPs' priorities away from the needs of their constituents.

## 4. Conclusion

Afghanistan's post-2001 democratic experiment has combined imported democratic institutions with a range of other power structures, networks of allegiance and methods of negotiating power. Some of these are rooted in tradition, while others have emerged as a result of conflict dynamics and new opportunities. Representative governance in the country is thus an evolving hybrid of democratic procedures and existing practices that interact in diverse and at times unexpected ways. It is unlikely to resemble Western-style, liberal democracy with its attendant social freedoms in the near future, nor is there much local desire for it to do so. However, if supporters of democratisation continue their efforts based on a realistic understanding of how representation functions in practice, there is still space for the emergence of a durable political system that Afghans can trust to respond to their needs.

### About AREU

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit's mission is to inform and influence policy and practice through conducting high-quality, policy-relevant research and actively disseminating the results, and to promote a culture of research and learning.

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