



# SPECIAL REPORT

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## ABOUT THE REPORT

This report analyzes the impact of current political, economic, and security transitions in Afghanistan on four selected communities. From March to June 2015, researchers from the United States Institute of Peace conducted interviews with government officials, civil society members, tribal elders, and local residents. The study focused on local political changes since the 2014 election; the relationship of these changes to national political, economic, and security trends; and local opinions about upcoming elections, the National Unity Government, and Afghanistan's future political development.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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*Anna Larson and Noah Coburn*

## Resources Over Reform in Afghanistan

### How Changes in the Political Economy Are Reshaping Local Politics

## Summary

- Following the negotiated settlement of Afghanistan's 2014 presidential election, hopes were high for political reform. Realistically, achieving corruption-free, local governance and increased citizen participation was always going to be a long-term endeavor, but even incremental shifts toward this goal have not materialized. This has led to a growing disillusionment with President Ashraf Ghani, Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah, and the prospects for democratic reform more generally.
- While the actual outcome of the vote and the drawn-out process of political appointments continue to be debated, the local political elite—including those with status as commanders from the jihad and civil war period and, more recently, newcomers relying on international aid and military resources for their influence—have only become more firmly entrenched.
- With the international troop drawdown well underway, sources of funds are changing. Political figures that previously gained wealth by working with international organizations, and particularly the international military, now must seek alternative sources of income.
- Many local leaders have used recent rounds of voting in national and provincial elections to consolidate their positions of influence, while simultaneously becoming less deferential to the central government and diversifying economic strategies ahead of the potential decline of state power.
- Much of the tension in communities results from how recent transitions are altering elite strategies for accessing resources, whether from the government, the international community, or elsewhere. This means upcoming parliamentary elections, when held, are likely to contribute to the consolidation of economic and political power in the hands of an elite few and will strengthen outlying powerholders in the provinces in their struggles against central government control.

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SPECIAL REPORT 386

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## CONTENTS

Introduction	2
Transitioning in Afghanistan	2
Local-Level Transitions	5
Shifts in Local Power and Resource Control	11
Looking Ahead to the Parliamentary Elections	14
Conclusion	15

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- The international community needs to look beyond broad political reform to the ways in which economic shifts at the local level are both entrenching certain political practices and providing the only real opportunities for change.

## Introduction

The inauguration of Ashraf Ghani as president in 2014, and his rival Abdullah Abdullah as chief executive officer soon after, gave hope to Afghans and the international community that a new era of effective governance was beginning. Ghani's inaugural address fueled speculation that widespread reforms—including merit-based appointments and reduced corruption—were on the horizon. However, at the district level at least, the rhetoric of promised reforms has not brought about significant political change; instead, it is ongoing economic shifts that are having the greatest impact on local Afghan politics.

From March to June 2015, USIP conducted interviews to study recent changes to the local political economy in four communities in Afghanistan: Dasht-i Barchi and Qara Bagh in Kabul Province, Bagram in Parwan Province, and Dehdadi in Balkh Province. The study looked at the impact on local politics of the establishment of the National Unity Government (NUG) and other national transitions, including the drawdown of international troops and decline in funding. The analysis in these districts indicates that important shifts are taking place locally. For example, in Bagram, elites are diversifying their resources and reducing their reliance on military contracts in light of the coming closure of the Bagram air base. In Dasht-i Barchi, Ghani's perceived involvement has meant that district appointments are less predictably the result of the political influence of one of the two main Hazara leaders. These changes have little to do with the systematic reform goals Ghani laid out early on and more with the attempts among elites to maintain or assert control over shifting resources. This maneuvering is impacting local communities and has implications for the future of democratic governance in Afghanistan.

The four areas were selected primarily because they all have relatively close ties to central-level politics and yet have experienced recent transitions in different ways. They also provide a diverse sample of urban, semi-urban, and rural settings and ethnic compositions—Dasht-i Barchi largely represents one ethnic group, Qara Bagh and Bagram represent two, and Dehdadi represents an uneven mix. Interviews were also conducted in Paktya Province, but security problems and the difficulty in ascertaining change in an area new to the researchers made it difficult to gather sufficient data for analysis. While none of the studied areas are located in the country's least secure regions, Qara Bagh and Bagram have experienced increases in violent attacks over the past few years that have shaped the opinions of respondents. Furthermore, communities like these, where the government has a certain degree of presence, stand to either lose or gain the most during this transition period—and, as demonstrated recently in Kunduz, areas with a significant government presence can still fall quickly into conflict.<sup>1</sup>

## Transitioning in Afghanistan

### Hope for Reform

The presidential polls in 2014 marked the first time an Afghan head of state had been succeeded through an electoral process. Constitutionally, President Hamid Karzai was barred from running, having already served two terms. Contrary to some predictions that he might try to force a third term, elections took place on schedule with nine candidates contesting the first round.

However, what followed was, in many ways, simply an extension of the corrupt, patronage-driven processes that had flourished under Karzai's administration and had shaped the previous rounds of voting in 2009 and 2010. While the first round vote in 2014 occurred with great optimism and few complaints about the process, the second round between Ghani and Abdullah was mired in controversy and allegations of fraud. A protracted process of counting and recounting votes led to a stalemate, international intervention, an unprecedented recount of all eight million ballots cast, and ultimately a negotiated compromise between Ghani and Abdullah that formed the NUG.<sup>2</sup> The six-month delay contributed to the further slide of the Afghan economy as investing and trading stalled. During the provincial council elections, which were held simultaneously and largely ignored by the international press, similar frustrations were expressed about corruption and delayed results. Respondents from all the areas studied reported frustration with the long process and the ambiguity the crisis created. As a result, much of the renewed hope for reform was ultimately replaced by disaffection by the time the NUG was formed. The messy process in establishing the government seemed to signal that elites would determine the distribution of political resources regardless of popular participation.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, formation of the NUG allowed Afghan voters, political analysts, and international observers to hold onto some hope that a seemingly stark break from the Karzai regime would facilitate much-needed political and economic reform. Reported turnout in the election was high—something that surprised many analysts—and despite the elite-brokered outcome, many seemed hopeful that a new president would help reform a government that was ineffective, aid-dependent, laden by corruption, and rapidly losing legitimacy.<sup>4</sup>

With the former World Bank technocrat and anthropologist Ghani installed as president and Abdullah sworn in as chief executive officer, the NUG had the potential to combine the technical skills of the former with the political savvy of the latter and to forge a union that might represent a broad geographic and ethnic alliance of south and north and Pashtun and non-Pashtun, possibly preventing widespread civil unrest. In his inaugural address, Ghani outlined several national-level reforms, including taking a zero-tolerance approach to corruption in all institutions and in the judicial branch in particular. In addition, he committed to the decentralization of state resources and greater participation by local actors in the political process.<sup>5</sup>

Initially, Ghani's actions seemed to support these statements and led many Afghans to believe that tangible change was on its way. By making fast executive decisions regarding the removal of officials whose performance was found lacking and adopting a zero-tolerance approach to administrative inactivity, the president generated high approval ratings and a sense of renewed hope among Afghans, particularly in Kabul.<sup>6</sup> Several sensational moves—such as media reports of Ghani appearing in the middle of the night at police stations to make sure officers were on duty—added to the hope that real change had come.<sup>7</sup>

However, these initial hopes and actions proved short-lived and superficial.<sup>8</sup> While the promise of political change at the top and discussions about replacing all cabinet members and governors gave the appearance of reform, substantive political shifts have been slow to emerge and those changes made have had minimal impact. Deadlock over political appointments in particular are having an impact on local politics; in nine out of thirty-four provinces, governorships have still not been decided.<sup>9</sup> These delays have also furthered the perception by both local Afghans and political elites that elections and political administration are not transparent processes but rather closed venues where a small ruling class can divide the spoils of power among themselves. The role of U.S. secretary of state John Kerry in negotiating the settlement between Ghani and Abdullah—and the international community's relative silence regarding the ongoing lack of reform—has led many Afghans to believe that the international

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***The lack of substantive change in national-level policy has driven local-level jockeying for positions and influence.***

community is at least complicit in the continuation of the current system. This impression has been affirmed by a corrupt provincial council election process in 2014 and the absence of any real progress to finalize electoral reforms or a clear path forward for that process.<sup>10</sup>

The lack of substantive change in national-level policy has driven local-level jockeying for positions and influence. In some areas, this has intensified as a result of the elections and the ensuing sense of a power vacuum. These local political struggles have taken different forms in different places, depending on the resources available, the combination of actors and interests, and the engagement of the local community.

***Political and Economic Transitions***

While the grand-scale political proposals at the national level—such as the president’s declared “jihad on corruption,”<sup>11</sup> his plan to introduce national identity cards, and his apparent commitment to merit- (as opposed to patronage-) based appointments—have captured many of the headlines in the Afghan and international media, several other ongoing shifts over the past two years may be doing much more to reshape Afghanistan economically and politically. The first of these has been the prospect and actual reduction of international (and particularly U.S.) troops. In 2011, more than one hundred thousand U.S. troops were stationed across the country, and now there are less than ten thousand. The initial withdrawal plans laid out by the administration of Barack Obama to remove all but five thousand troops by the end of 2015 have been put on hold due to the recent resurgence of the Taliban. However, even though the drawdown of international troops has been slowed, the onus of security has fallen almost entirely on Afghan security forces. This has shifted the dynamics of the conflict, allowing the Taliban to take over areas previously under government control, such as parts of the Helmand Valley and Kunduz provinces, as well as—temporarily—Kunduz City.

Compounding the effects of the international troop withdrawal has been the reduction in international development assistance. Although donor governments have pledged to continue supporting development in Afghanistan at levels comparable with those of the last two years, predictable sources of funds—for example, from Provincial Reconstruction Team bases that directly funded local projects and boosted the local economy through construction contracts and general operating needs—have come to an end. This has meant that leaders who have relied on international funding for support, whether through business contracts or donor funds, have been forced to look elsewhere for resources. In many cases, since donor money has increasingly been funneled through the Afghan national government, there are more incentives for leaders to maintain ties with the government. There is evidence that as certain forms of rents associated with the international intervention have contracted, some leaders have scrambled to secure other sources of power, including government positions.

More locally, some communities have reacted to this political instability by making deals with the Taliban, evident by the recent truce negotiated with the Taliban in Dand-e Ghor.<sup>12</sup> In two districts studied, Bagram and Qara Bagh, local government officials have become less assertive and appear in public less often because of uncertainty surrounding whether the military would back their authority if challenged. The possibility of more countrywide conflict has made local businessmen wary of investing domestically in the communities studied; as one government worker from Dasht-i Barchi described, “There is no investment here. Money is invested outside the county, and people are taking their capital and savings out of Afghan banks.” Merchants and commanders<sup>13</sup> are rethinking their economic strategies as international funds and contracts are drying up, and security concerns are affecting how Afghans make personal economic decisions, such as building a house or getting married. In addition, the number of Afghans seeking asylum in Europe doubled in 2015, compared with 2014.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps even more significant than the decline in international aid has been the perception of its coming to an end among both local powerholders and ordinary Afghans. In all areas studied, those interviewed expressed concern about the country's economic future. Respondents with some disposable income talked frequently about sending money and family members overseas—a practice becoming increasingly common among those who can afford it.

Whereas English-speaking, western-dressed bureaucrats with connections to international agencies had previously wielded significant influence through their ability to broker contracting deals, this pattern of influence has shifted now that there is less funding available and the threat of sanctions against commanders has almost disappeared with decreased international presence. This has had an impact at all levels: For example, local commanders are reasserting their power in places like Bagram, where economic success (e.g., in winning a contract on the base) previously depended on a certain degree of public compliance with international norms, which are now increasingly openly defied, even at the highest levels.<sup>15</sup> In addition, many smaller aid agencies and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are being forced to close regional, and sometimes central, offices as a result of decreasing levels of security. This is contributing to the already rising levels of unemployment, especially among recent graduates.

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## Local-Level Transitions

While national-level shifts have impacted each area studied, local-level shifts have had an even greater impact on the political economy over the past two years.

### ***Dasht-i Barchi***

Dasht-i Barchi, a suburb of Kabul City, covers administrative neighborhoods (*nahia*) six and thirteen. Many residents were once Pashtun, but the population is now almost entirely Hazara, with large numbers migrating from Kabul and several other areas, especially Ghazni and Bamiyan. Dasht-i Barchi's population has increased rapidly over the last ten years, currently estimated at more than one million people. This influx has made land a scarce and valuable commodity, contributing to land disputes with the few remaining Pashtun families. Government services remain limited, with no public health facilities and few public schools—although private clinics and schools have a significant presence. The majority of the population work in small shops or as daily wage laborers.

Over the past few years, Dasht-i Barchi has been a picture of uncertainty and decline, reflecting the situation more generally in Kabul City. As one respondent noted, "No one is buying anything anymore. Clothes shops, furniture shops, crockery shops are all becoming food shops, because these days people only buy food." For the few wealthy families in the neighborhood, land speculation has for many years provided a lucrative business. Mass urbanization of Hazara communities migrating from the central highlands has steadily pushed up the value of land over the last decade, resulting in the formation of local "land mafias" connected to the two main Hazara political parties and their leaders. These mafias often sell the same piece of land to multiple buyers, charge fees to those selling land for the reliable transfer of funds and title deeds, and grab government lands to be sold illegally. Their activities have led to the creation of *shahraks* or small towns, supposedly on government lands, in and around the area.

Several respondents complained that the government "had no plan" for the area. Landowners are therefore building "shelters instead of homes" because they are concerned about repossession. One man reported that after buying a property and asking for the deed, the former owner refused to supply it, saying that he had "people with influence (*wasita*) in the government to back him."



During the drawn-out election process in 2014, the market crashed, with people simply not investing in land as a result of the political uncertainty. According to some landowners and property dealers interviewed for this study, land values halved. While business picked up briefly after the NUG was formed, land prices have returned to their lowest levels seen that year. Respondents commonly attributed this decline to the electoral process and the continued uncertainty of cabinet nominee delays and friction between the two leaders. One property dealer provided a detailed analysis of the situation:

The land business and other kinds of business were good before the elections. During the election campaigns, people were expecting a great improvement in security and business and a decrease in corruption after the elections. But the election result led to the unity government, which affected all aspects of our lives negatively....

Land prices have decreased, and I cannot make back the money I paid for land. For instance, before the election, I had bought one Beswa (100 square metres) for 700,000 Afs, and it is now worth 400,000 Afs. This decline in the price of land and also the current insecurity and uncertainty after the elections has stopped all business.

I had been planning to run for the upcoming parliamentary election. My chance of being able to run in the elections was around 70 percent, but now considering the situation with the land business and the current political and security conditions, I will not be able to run because I cannot afford the campaign costs.

Increasingly, those with money to spend in Dasht-i Barchi are investing it in Dubai, as there is no viable outlet for investment locally. International NGOs and government aid agencies are streamlining projects and cutting staff, resulting in fewer jobs. With the uncertainty surrounding the new president's methods of making political appointments, respondents feel that previous methods of securing government documents, such as land titles—through connections and sometimes bribes—are no longer certain to yield results as they were under Karzai.

As an urban area, the key administrative post in Dasht-i Barchi is the head of the police district or *hawza*. Hawza chiefs are police appointments and are in charge of security and policing but also oversee administrative functions such as the collection of taxes and distribution of identity cards. Thus, they have significant control over government resources in the area. The Hawza chief and those working with him serve as important points of access to both formal government services and less formal sources of government funds through patronage for both ordinary citizens and particularly businessmen seeking to work with the government. According to one *wakil-e gozar*<sup>16</sup> interviewed for this study, ordinarily, "The Hawza chief nominees are proposed by the security commander of Kabul to Ministry of Interior and then the name selected goes to the president for approval. After gaining presidential approval, a person is then appointed as Hawza chief." However, he went on to describe that the process for appointing the Hawza chief after the 2014 election was different: "This time, the new Hawza chief was directly selected by the president."

Respondents from Dasht-i Barchi explained that after the election, Ghani appointed a new Hawza chief who was a relative of Sayed Hussein Anwari, the leader of the Harakat-e Islami-e Mardum political party,<sup>17</sup> in return for his support to the president's electoral campaign. This was a slightly odd fit, however, as the community had a relatively small Harakat support base as compared to the sizable groups there backing Hazara leaders Karim Khalili and Mohammed Mohaqqeq. Recently, though, due to a public altercation between the new Hawza chief and the

head of another Hawza in a different part of the city,<sup>18</sup> the Presidential Palace fired the Dasht-i Barchi chief and, apparently bowing to pressure from Hazara political leaders, replaced him with another figure loyal to Mohaqqueq. Most respondents were skeptical of the value of these replacements, considering them unlikely to bring about meaningful political and economical change. Importantly, the replacement process was unusual and, to many, unaccountable, as it was not the result of the influence of Khalili or Mohaqqueq.

Dasht-i Barchi's population is much larger than in the other communities studied, and it is situated close to central government offices in Kabul City. Its residents are, on average, relatively well-educated, and many work in government offices. But the roads in the area remain unpaved, with the exception of one central street. Local residents put forth several explanations for this: First, simply that the government paid attention to other neighborhoods instead as a result of ethnic discrimination. Second, that residents living close to the road habitually paid government offices not to pave the roads over their own lands—out of fear that they would not be adequately compensated for lands lost due to road construction. Third, that the three main rival party leaders who had support bases in the area—Khalili (the former vice president), Mohaqqueq (a member of parliament), and the Sayed group leaders Anwari and Asif Mohseni (members of parliament)—were worried that, should Dasht-i Barchi become too desirable a place to live, the Hazara people would sell their land and move elsewhere, thus diluting their support base in the area. A final explanation was that these leaders would not allow road paving to take place unless it occurred in their own name; they believed that for their own credibility and political standing, it was better that no roads be paved than be paved with the credit going to a rival leader.

All of this has resulted in ongoing negotiations among the political and business elite, who have, in some cases, attempted to move supporters into government posts; but in general, these key figures have remained unchanged as they compete for resources. Seeing resources come into other parts of the city—most notably in the form of infrastructure projects—has frustrated local residents, and therefore, many respondents are critical of the NUG. At the same time, as primarily a Shia area, concerns were raised about the growth of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) or Daesh as it is known locally; Daesh has singled out Shias in some of its recent attacks. Perhaps, as a result, while respondents from the community complained about the NUG, none want to see it overthrown or immediately replaced—for fear that this might result in an expansion of the influence of Daesh.

Thus, in considering the future of politics in the country, most respondents are convinced that parliamentary elections should go ahead as scheduled, but they have little optimism that the polls would change much locally, with key political leaders and businessmen continuing to use elections to consolidate resources for themselves.

### ***Qara Bagh***

Qara Bagh is the northernmost district in Kabul, situated on the fertile Shomali plain. Economically, the district relies on various agricultural products, particularly high-value fruits, such as grapes. However, over the past decade, the number of small-scale industries tied to construction has increased, benefiting from the relative proximity to Kabul. The district is diverse ethnically, populated primarily by Pashtuns and Tajiks, with pockets of other smaller minority groups. In part because of its proximity to Kabul and in part because of its strategic importance, Qara Bagh and the adjacent districts have produced a disproportionate number of national political figures, including Karzai's chief of staff and later ambassador to Pakistan, Umar Daudzai, as well as some of the more influential parliamentarians from Kabul Province, including current legislator and tribal leader Anwar Khan.

Both politics and business tend to revolve around a relatively small group of local leaders. Two of the most influential political figures in Qara Bagh are Anwar Khan (whose brother is also head of the district council) and the provincial council representative, Adel Khan. They are both highly involved in local politics and decisions around resource distribution. In 2013–14, for example, a new government market was built in the district’s center, where the best-positioned shops are owned by Anwar Khan. He has also built his own private market on government-owned land, reputedly through his connection to the town’s mayor. As one respondent described, “Qara Bagh municipality was supposed to build some markets in the bazaar but our parliamentarians bribed the mayor and used the venue and resources and built their own markets instead.” Anwar Khan is widely assumed to have direct or indirect influence over development projects, such as the paving of roads or building of schools, and over the way in which contracts are distributed for construction. He has used this assumption to his advantage in the run-up to both his own election as a parliamentarian in 2010 and in presidential elections in 2009 and 2014, suggesting in campaigns that he has the power to influence where and how development in the province is conducted. Numerous other elders, small-scale commanders, and businessmen are active in the district and, perhaps because the area is fairly resource-rich, the political elite are involved in a constant feud and repositioning themselves vis-à-vis one another.

This was particularly the case for the former district governor, who was at odds with Anwar Khan and his brother but was generally supported by those in the district who affiliated themselves with Karzai and his allies. In 2013, Anwar Khan organized a protest, using three hundred youths to shut down traffic in the district center and along the busy road connecting Kabul to the north of the country until the former district governor was removed. This local conflict was intensified by the ambiguity on a national level brought on by the elections and formation of the NUG; and, as a result, the appointment of a new district governor was a drawn-out process that involved political jostling between two main factions in the district.

Also because of its proximity to Kabul, Qara Bagh has received substantial aid from international agencies over the past decade. More recently, though, development projects are increasingly being administrated through government departments, such as the provincial branches of the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) and Ministry of Agriculture Irrigation and Livestock, rather than through international agencies. This has made these departments more visible and known to the community; respondents frequently talked about them as the source of development funding. This by no means guarantees equitable distribution, however. As in many parts of Afghanistan, local elders (referred to as *maliks* or elsewhere *arbabs*) are selected to represent the community to the government, as well as other outside groups, such as international NGOs. In recent years, however, propped up by external sources, such as weapons or external funding, many maliks are seen as having abandoned their historical roles as community advocates and as increasingly acting on their own interests.<sup>19</sup>

In Qara Bagh, local maliks play a significant role in negotiating the terms of Afghan government and internationally sponsored projects and are seen to be taking cuts for themselves or ensuring that projects are positioned close to their own or their families’ homes. As one elder complained, “There are some useless projects, such as a funeral parlor that was built a long way from our village. . . . The project was funded by MRRD and it was supposed to be built in the center of the village, but our malik bribed the MRRD staff and built it very close to his own house. In general maliks and their relatives get the most benefit from the projects from start to end.” Nevertheless, bigger projects, such as the building of schools and a teacher training institute, have generally had a positive effect on the local economy. Respondents’ complaints about the economy generally concerned individual elites’ attainment of small projects and not the government or donors who were overseeing them.



Insurgent activity in Qara Bagh has risen over the last year. Local Pashtuns have long been supporters of Hizb-i Islami, and some branches have had a tempestuous relationship with the Afghan government over the past decade and are still blamed for insurgent attacks. More recently, there have been reports of ISIS being present in the district, though this seems to reflect more the ability of ISIS and other insurgent groups to leverage the deep political divides in the locality than an actual ideological affinity of its residents with the cause of the Syria-based group. Almost all respondents expressed a distaste for ISIS's recent brutal methods for establishing influence.

Local divisions were particularly pronounced during the last election. Reports were rampant of national campaigns bringing "bags of money" to the district. Anwar Khan and other key leaders were active in the campaign process, with significant negotiation and repositioning following the first round of voting. All of this seemed to produce even more money as leaders sold their support to candidates on multiple occasions—a practice most assume is now ingrained in Afghan elections. The continued dominance of the small group of powerful elites and the delays in electoral reform has meant there is little optimism about the ability of either elections specifically or the Afghan government more generally to make meaningful changes. Instead, most assume elections will continue to be a vehicle for the powerful to legitimize their position while preventing the entrance of new actors into the political game. As one respondent suggested, all the key actors, particularly the current members of parliament (MPs) are likely to participate actively in the parliamentary elections since "they will never quit this milky cow!"

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### ***Bagram***

Bagram District is just to the northeast of Qara Bagh and is most well-known for the massive U.S. base there. While agriculture has historically dominated the district's economy, over the past fifteen years, funds from contractors working on the base have led to the establishment of a large market just outside the base's gates. These resources have enabled mid-level commanders and businessmen with connections with the international military, the Afghan government, and sometimes insurgent groups to enhance their influence. This has also led to great wealth inequality between those residents with and without close connections to the contractors. As one man described, his local elder, who had been working with some of these contractors, "didn't have a bicycle two years ago but now has a [new model] car." At the time of this study, shutdown of the base was expected, and as a result, contractors were beginning to sell off surplus supplies and reduce their dependence on the base economy by establishing their construction businesses in other locations and moving into the oil industry. The oil business is particularly popular among former base contractors because it involves the construction of chain gas stations that carry the proprietor's name, advertising its economic strength in the district. It is likely that these former contractors will drive economic growth in the coming years.

Despite some tensions, most of the elite have tried to avoid overt conflict, partly because the base has generated enough resources to keep everyone satisfied. It is difficult to determine whether this uneasy truce will continue as resources from the base dry up completely. Several commanders and businessmen are said to have recently built new guesthouses and offices, perhaps due to increased interest in local politics. While these figures already have close ties to many parliamentarians from the district, it is unclear how much they will also attempt to work with or co-opt those provincial council members elected in the 2014 vote.

Two key players in the district, Haji Almas and Mir Rahman Rahmani, are also MPs. Oftentimes busy with politics and business in Kabul, they have little involvement in local-level decision making on a daily basis, leaving much of this up to their less influential allies. Further,

while they maintain significant influence over government appointments, they are rarely seen in the district. One member of the Bagram Youth Association described how appointments generally work:

The district governor is appointed by the government...following an examination procedure. But in general, the people I know of have been appointed to government roles using their connections and the exam is superficial, because MPs and government officials can change the result of the exams as they wish. We have a prosecutor called [X], but he was hired by General Baba Jan and Mir Rahman because he is their relative. There have been no disputes in this regard yet, because all of them come along with each other.

A village elder also emphasized the importance of connections to Almas and Rahmani:

The governor of Bagram is the puppet of Haji Almas, and Haji Almas had the biggest role in his appointment as governor. Haji Almas got the recommendation letter for the governor from high-ranking officials of government. There was no serious conflict over his appointment as district governor, although the Director of Intelligence [for Bagram District], who was one of Mir Rahman Rahmani's men, created some problems. Eventually, however, Haji Almas had him fired.

While there were minor issues between these two players three years ago over the appointment of the district governor, Abdulshukoor Qudusi (from the northern Salang District of Bagram), there was notably less tension than was observed over the same appointment in Qara Bagh, primarily because of the predominance of these two figures and of Almas in particular and their presumed desire to make sure that business deals continue to work effectively. Similarly, with the presence of both the international military and pro-government commanders in the area, while the base has endured regular Taliban attacks, there do not appear to have been large shifts in security levels over the past few years.

Development projects and the promise of international assistance were a key aspect of campaign rhetoric in the district. Both Almas and Rahmani have claimed responsibility for the more successful development projects, particularly the paving of the Kabul-Parwan highway that occurred between 2012 and 2014. Almas claimed during the campaigns that this project had been the direct result of his collaboration with Abdullah. These claims, of course, ignore the international community's keen interest and role in paving the road since it made transportation to the base much easier as well. While district residents remain skeptical of leaders' pronounced roles in various development projects, these claims still appear to have had a significant impact. As one man put it, this was "a very effective lie" during the presidential election campaign.

The means through which Almas, Rahmani, and others are now generating resources has shifted from a reliance on military contracts to a more diverse strategy that includes moving into the oil business, selling materials from the base, and investing overseas. These shifts, however, had started before establishment of the NUG, prompted more by economic necessity in the wake of declining troop numbers on the base. The new government's first year in office appears to have had little impact, posing no challenge to the district's existing powerholders.

### ***Dehdadi***

Dehdadi, in the northern province of Balkh, is situated close to the provincial capital of Mazar-i Sharif and comprises thirty-six villages. Its population is ethnically diverse and generally quite well-educated, partly due to its proximity to the city. The economy is driven by a mix of agriculture and wages from those working in Mazar-i Sharif, especially daily wages from construction and government positions. Government services are relatively functional in that

most villages now have access to electricity and several roads are paved. Security is generally good (although there are reports of increased kidnappings), and for this reason, several international NGOs work in the district.

Perhaps due to the district's lack of significant economic resources, such as the contracts in Bagram and land in Dasht-i Barchi, and the overarching influence of the Balkh provincial governor Atta Mohammed Noor, no key commander is dominant in the district and most respondents pointed instead to local elders as being powerholders. The district governor, Wali Shah Khan (in office since 2009), is seen primarily as an administrative figure, who is politically inactive and has little de facto influence over decision making. This appears to be part of a political strategy put in place by Governor Atta, whose monopoly over political and economic resources across the province is well established (and has relied, in part, on controlling both provincial council and parliamentary elections).<sup>20</sup>

No MP from the Balkh Province constituency actually comes from Dehdadi District, and Balkh MPs' involvement in local development projects—or even local decision making in general—is minimal. One case in which local residents did manage to engage otherwise-distant elected provincial officials was in the provision of electricity for four villages in the district. After several years of being unable to secure the required central government permission for the extension of transmission lines, despite all other villages having had electricity provided, a village representative was sent to Kabul in late 2009 to lobby some of the provincial MPs. The representative described in an interview how three MPs accompanied him to the appropriate ministries and were able to secure permission for the electricity to be provided. A few months later, during and following the campaigns for parliamentary elections in 2010, these MPs visited Dehdadi to “monitor implementation of the project” and claimed to have provided the electricity for the villages. Presumably, similar claims will be made before and during the upcoming parliamentary election. While the connection to the electricity project may aid their campaigns, the MPs' success in bringing electricity to these villages has also highlighted the importance of having the district represented nationally, giving rise to discussions among some respondents about how to coordinate votes across the district to send a new representative, from Dehdadi itself, to parliament.

## Shifts in Local Power and Resource Control

An analysis of who makes or influences decisions in a community can indicate how power and resources are distributed, particularly in times of transition. Decisions surrounding the appointment of local officials (e.g., district governors) and the allocation of resources are particularly significant in identifying local structures of influence. How decision-making authority shifts (or in some cases, does not shift) in these two areas can indicate how broader political changes are having an impact on local politics and resource distribution. All the shifts have important implications for upcoming parliamentary elections.

### *Political Appointments*

Local Afghan politics is notorious for the range of actors involved. In Bagram for example, personality matters far more than position, and key actors include MPs but also informal leaders, such as tribal elders and contractors who gained status working for the international military—all of whom are involved in negotiations over key issues. Across each area studied, different degrees of influence are attached to the roles of parliamentarian, provincial council member, district governor, malik, district security chief, and others—depending on personalities, historical structures of authority, and opportunities that a particular position provides for rent seeking. This means that the appointment of government positions is not

simply about securing a position but also about other political leaders attempting to exert their influence over the process and shape how decisions are made. The protagonists change, however, from place to place. For example, in Qara Bagh, local district leaders such as Anwar Khan clearly shaped the appointment process, whereas in Dehdadi, there was little evidence of local input into the selection because of the predominant influence of the provincial governor. These patterns and nuances, part of a performance to demonstrate influence, also have implications for Ghani's proposed political reforms locally and for implementing a uniform reform policy across such diverse political landscapes.

Formally, all provincial and district governor appointments are made at the president's discretion—one characteristic of Afghanistan's highly centralized political system. During his terms, Karzai maintained the ultimate power to make these appointments, but in reality, he used a mixed strategy, establishing a senior appointment panel to advise on some merit-based selections, while in other cases allowing key power brokers around him (including regional warlord-turned-government-officials like Atta) a certain level of autonomy in making appointments that would suit them politically, in return for loyalty to the center.

Under the NUG, however, certain changes are taking place. On the one hand, the power of former Northern Alliance commanders such as Almas and Noor appears to be increasing—either as a result of being connected to Abdullah, as in the former case, or, paradoxically, being sidelined by the NUG, as in the latter case. Noor's blatantly publicized meetings with powerful warlords excluded from the NUG have contributed to suspicions that he is part of a plan to reinstate Karzai or to begin a separate opposition movement.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, unlike Karzai, Ghani has made numerous rapid and at times unilateral decisions, particularly when making smaller government appointments in and around Kabul. While these decisions might have bypassed patronage networks with the intention to undercut them, they have also lacked the trade-off in loyalty to the central government by those patronage networks that Karzai's appointments had. The prospect of central government being able to buy loyalty is, furthermore, weakening rapidly, and the discretionary funds available to the central government are decreasing.

According to anecdotal evidence in the initial period following last year's elections, the process of appointing district governors is even less uniform than it was under Karzai. While at the local level, those individuals actually influencing politics and controlling resources have not changed significantly, how they do this has become less transparent. Over the last decade, almost all appointments were made as a result of local powerholders' suggestions to Karzai, with the addition of a pro forma examination process that was often manipulated by government officials. Resistance from a rival, local powerholder occasionally changed the final outcome of these appointments (as in Qara Bagh). Recently, however, commanders appear to be exerting greater influence over appointments in some districts (with less deference to the center), while the fulfillment of campaign promises and the unilateral decisions of the president are determining these appointments in other districts. This has contributed to an overall increase in tensions as competing local power brokers work to get their allies appointed to government positions in an increasingly uncertain process.

As one respondent described, "The election was supposed to bring about a stable government, while now it is the opposite. Power is divided between Pashtuns and Tajiks and they are fighting on who takes what. Ethnic tensions have increased and every day it is getting more insecure. The businesses of people are stopped. There is no government at the provincial levels. Everyone is acting like they are the boss, but really the decision-making mechanisms are in different hands." This quote is indicative of the wider struggles over appointments in the chaos that followed last year's elections and how they continue to be part of a larger protracted process of dividing local resources. This is the kind of political gridlock that the Taliban and other insurgent groups have taken advantage of over the past year, mobilizing public support

for their cause through highlighting the government's inefficiencies and delays. By extension, the changing nature and source of resources may have just as much if not more influence over political change than the NUG and its supposed reforms.

## **Resources**

While nationally and locally much of the political chatter has centered on the appointment of key officials, the largest political changes actually seem to be in how local political actors, formal and informal, respond to shifts in sources of economic rents. Funds from the international community and military are decreasing, thereby increasing the importance of government and business resources, both legal and illegal. Similarly, connections with the international community are no longer as useful as they once were. Many of the political elite, nationally and locally, have sustained themselves over the past decade through their affiliation with the Afghan government and the international presence. Even those who opposed the government managed to secure resources from groups like the Taliban specifically because they were opposing the international presence—and these funds are likely to shift as well.

Political figures are now finding government funding channels (e.g., by acquiring a seat in parliament or securing a position in the NUG) more attractive, since it is discretionary donor funding outside of the government structure that has decreased most significantly at this stage. The private sector is also adapting to shifts in local political realities; for example, businessmen are taking advantage of the fluctuating land prices in Dasht-i Barchi. Such fluctuations—more an indirect effect of perceptions of economic uncertainty due to the fraught political transitions—are likely to continue regardless of how successful government reforms are. Increased rule of law will make deeds more valuable, whereas continued instability will make seizing land by force most useful. Local elites are adapting to these changes as they anticipate various potential scenarios.

Development and infrastructure projects represent one of several key resource pools that local-level elites compete over—for the actual resources themselves and for the credit for providing them. The latter of these is exacerbated by election campaigns, in which the delivery or claiming of past delivery of projects plays a prominent role. Across all four areas, MPs and provincial council members have been most visible locally in the run up to elections as they attempt to turn credit for projects into votes. In some cases, however, candidate presence can exacerbate frustrations of local voters who have now voted five times in the past eleven years but not seen significant improvements in governance or the economy. This frustration, though, does not exist in a vacuum; many voters are actually more frustrated with the political leaders closest to them.

In Bagram, respondents' complaints about the way in which local maliks engineered small development projects to work to their advantage ranged from mild resignation to bitter resentment. Unlike in neighboring Qara Bagh, the impetus for elites to demonstrate their power and influence vis-à-vis one another in Bagram did not result in development projects that benefited the general public. Moreover, the drastic reduction in scale of the local U.S. military base has led to soaring unemployment, a relative increase in power among commanders formerly blacklisted from winning contracts from the base, the shift of elite interests to the oil industry, and increased incidences of crime and theft as the general resource pool declines.

In all areas studied, these rivalries among elites were exacerbated by the 2014 elections, in which key powerholders aligned with Ghani or Abdullah and competed to demonstrate the potential impact of their being connected to central networks of power. Following the polls—in the context of the NUG's first year in office, the further drawdown of troops, and perceived reduction in international funds (increasingly being channeled through the government)—competition for declining central government resources has increased, demonstrated by vehement protests against several of the president's provincial governorship and cabinet appointments.

***The changing nature and source of resources may have just as much if not more influence over political change than the NUG and its supposed reforms.***



## Looking Ahead to the Parliamentary Elections

Unless the NUG collapses, the next chance for politics to shift in most communities will likely be the next round of parliamentary voting. The lack of a clear date for those parliamentary elections or concrete electoral reforms makes the potential for upheaval more serious, as elites across the country seek to ensure their own influence over the unknowns in the process. The jostling over positions within the selection body for the new Independent Electoral Commission, for example, has been protracted and has contributed to even further delays in setting a date for the polls. With so much government power concentrated in the executive branch and a power-sharing agreement that has given key opposition figures a place in the cabinet, the parliamentary elections may be even less important than they have been previously.

For many voters, this situation is aggravating, especially given that there was real potential for reform in 2014. Not only did the new government have the opportunity to reduce corruption, but the decline in international funds that propped up many of the elite had the potential to allow for more local political competition. With lower financial stakes, some of the older commanders might have given way to younger leaders, interested in establishing their own reputations. Under such conditions, the emergence of more political actors could have encouraged more responsive governance and supported the growth of civil society. The prospect of constitutional changes could have helped further decentralize power and provide more effective mechanisms for power sharing with the Taliban or other antigovernment groups. There is still some hope that these shifts in the political economy will help encourage more democratic practices locally, but the current national-level stalemate and the international community's relative silence regarding the situation are making that less probable.

Most respondents in the areas studied are convinced that parliamentary elections (originally supposed to occur in early 2015) are still likely to take place, but few believe the elections will change who possesses the real power locally. There were mixed responses to Ghan's announcement in June that the current MPs would maintain their positions until elections were held; some respondents consider this a violation of the constitution, some see it as a chance for MPs to increase their advantage as incumbents in the electoral race, and some see it as an excuse to further delay electoral reforms.

Afghanistan's constitution and centralized system of government devolves little power to legislators or provincial authorities, and individuals both within and outside parliament with connections to the executive branch were generally considered most likely to hold their own seats or control over the electoral process in the district. Locally, it is now difficult for respondents to envision how parliamentary elections will bring about change. In districts like Bagram and Qara Bagh, with entrenched long-standing parliamentarians (e.g., Khan and Almas), there is the assumption that these men will stand for election again and be likely to win through some combination of legitimate and illegitimate means. Similarly, in a district like Dehdadi, which does not have a representative or consistent connections with the Kabul government, there is little optimism that elections will change anything. Instead, in all areas, key concerns center on how the ongoing political and economic transitions will continue to shape respondents' own access to economic resources and opportunities.

Most respondents are frustrated with the slow pace of reform. As one voter suggested: "Minor reforms are useless. There needs to be serious changes in the election structure and among officials...The people in the system are corrupt and I don't believe that these people can implement any real reforms." Critically, the NUG agreement calls for the introduction of electronic voting cards. Respondents' views varied on whether the cards are necessary to actually solve electoral fraud but were unanimous that it is the first step toward a better, more legitimate election. Younger respondents in particular seem optimistic that this type of technological reform could help reduce electoral manipulation. However, the process of

***Most respondents in the areas studied are convinced that parliamentary elections are still likely to take place, but few believe the elections will change who possesses the real power locally.***

getting voting cards digitized has been beset with technical, operational, financial, and political problems, with the inclusion of a voter's ethnicity on the cards being an ongoing particular concern.

Voters' demands for reform have been echoed by the international community, including members that have withheld funding for the United Nations Development Programme's new electoral implementation program until reforms are executed. There has been no indication of how much reform will be enough for funds to be pledged. More generally, however, international diplomatic pressure on the NUG to fulfill its commitments and begin further reforms has largely been private, leaving few respondents convinced that the international community has their best interests in mind, despite their significant financial and military involvement in supporting the current government.

## Conclusion

This study of local politics and economics over the past two years of upheaval reveals some serious concerns but also reasons for optimism. While the electoral dispute of 2014 has not been resolved constitutionally, there seems to be little motivation for upending the current NUG structure for fear of what might replace it. Instead, most local Afghans are far more interested in how to reform the government to enable more predictable access to resources and services. The decline in international funds also has the potential to level the economic playing field in many communities. However, there is little optimism that the NUG can reform governance and the economy more widely. Despite the attention the media and international actors paid to Ghan's radical rhetoric and sensational actions at the beginning of his term, most respondents feel that his reforms have done little to change how power and resources are distributed at the district level.

Nevertheless, the national-level economic, security, and political changes over the last two years have had an impact in the four communities studied. Appointment processes have become less predictable—either because of the greater control of local powerholders or the hasty reactions of the president to sporadic incidents of malpractice. Existing elites are diversifying their strategies for maintaining control of local resources. There is now a greater reliance by ordinary Afghans and local leaders on government-funded projects due to a perceived decline in international funds (even though government revenues are also declining). Relatedly, competition has increased for making direct connections with the government and sharing in the spoils of the NUG.

In turn, these effects will have a direct impact on upcoming political processes, namely the proposed Constitutional Loya Jirga and parliamentary elections. Both apparently offer the opportunity for political change, particularly the former, in which a change in Afghanistan's entire political system (from presidential to parliamentary) is due to be discussed. Yet again, though, the actors involved will primarily be those people who have engineered influence with the central government and those select few who can afford the high campaign costs and security resources necessary to secure a seat in parliament. Competition for parliament seats will be greater than ever before—with connection to government resources more valuable as a result of their scarcity—and the contest may be more violent as a result.

## Notes

1. Researchers conducted interviews in these communities with government officials, civil society members, tribal elders, and local residents, focusing on the recent elections and local political change. The sample choice allowed a range of perspectives—from those of elite actors within government to elite actors outside of the main government structures, to those connected with the international community through civil society activism, to ordinary Afghans. Various age groups were targeted as well. Attempts were made to ensure that women and men were interviewed, but due to the researchers themselves being male, interviews with women outside urban areas were difficult to obtain. Approximately one-fifth of all interviews conducted were with women.

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16. Wakil-e Gozar is the elected head of a group of about one thousand families in a small urban neighborhood.
17. This branch of the Harakat party, led by Anwari, was formed around 2005 as a split from Ayatoallah Mohammed Asif Mohseni's original movement, which formed in the 1970s. Both the original and new branches primarily represent the Sayed religious group; both are registered in the Ministry of Justice as political parties.
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