

ETHNIC DIVERSITY IN AFGHANISTAN: CHALLENGES TO ELECTORAL DEVELOPMENT

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This article focuses on the obstacles created due to the ethnic misdemeanors in Afghanistan. Fraud and other critical aspects of the 2018 election for the Wolesi Jirga, Afghanistan's lower house of parliament, are systematically assessed and official election data and results are examined in depth. The Wolesi Jirga elections were full of manipulation causing great stress and harm to the Afghan suffrage. The implausible albeit restricted Afghan environment is further circumvented by operational mismanagement by the Independent Election Commission (IEC) throughout the electoral process. The single non-transferable voting (SNTV) system again proved to be a disaster resulting in the vast majority of Afghans voting for losing candidates and winning candidates receiving few votes. Afghanistan is a country that has been frequently discussed and debated in social media, academia, and the electoral arena due to her complex situations. There are issues, such as culture, contour, religion, geography, and ethnicity that each has her own influence in the short-haul electoral history of Afghanistan. However, among them, ethnicity has a unique impact on elections. Due to her geographic and geo-electoral importance, Afghanistan has suffered from chronic instability, invasions, civil wars, and ethnic purges both during her classic and modern history. Afghanistan is the homeland for various distinct ethnic groups of whom Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras are the largest. These groups are the main actors in the socio-economic and electoral scene of the country. There is not a majority ethnicity despite the fact that the groups are tremendously different in size. For instance, Pashtuns constitute 32%-42% of the Afghan population while another imperative ethnic group, Uzbeks, makes almost 10%. This paper examines the issues of ethnicity in Afghanistan as an obstacle to electoral growth.

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INTRODUCTION

Our article focuses on the obstacles created due to the ethnic misdemeanours in Afghanistan. Fraud and other critical aspects of the 2018 election for the Wolesi Jirga, Afghanistan's lower house of parliament, are systematically assessed and official election data and results are examined in depth. The Wolesi Jirga elections were full of manipulation causing great stress and harm to the Afghan suffrage. The implausible albeit restricted Afghan environment is further circumvented by operational mismanagement by the Independent Election Commission (IEC) throughout the electoral process. The single non-transferable voting (SNTV) regime did not favour the Afghan suffrage as a commendable majority voted for losing candidates as the winning candidates incurring few votes.¹ Afghanistan is a country that is frequently discussed and debated in social media, academia, and the electoral arena due to its complex situations. There are issues, such as culture, contour, religion, geography, and ethnicity that each has her own influence in the short-haul electoral history of Afghanistan.

However, among them, ethnicity has a unique impact on elections. Due to her geographic and geo-electoral importance, Afghanistan has suffered from chronic instability, invasions, civil wars, and ethnic purges both during her classic and modern history. Afghanistan is the homeland for various distinct ethnic groups of whom Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras are the largest.² These groups are the main actors in the socio-economic and electoral scene of the country. There is not a majority ethnicity despite the fact that the groups are tremendously different in size. For instance, Pashtuns constitute 32%-42% of the Afghan population while another imperative ethnic group, Uzbeks, makes almost 10%.³ This paper examines the issues of ethnicity in Afghanistan as an obstacle to electoral growth. Afghanistan is a country that is frequently discussed and debated in social media, academia, and the electoral arena. Due to her complex situations. There are issues, such as culture, contour, religion, geography, and ethnicity that each has her own influence in the short-haul electoral history of

Afghanistan. However, among them, ethnicity has a unique impact on elections.

Due to her geographic and geo-electoral importance, Afghanistan has suffered from chronic instability, invasions, civil wars, and ethnic purges both during her classic and modern history. Afghanistan is the homeland for various distinct ethnic groups of whom Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras are the largest. These groups are the main actors in the socio-economic and electoral scene of the country. There is not a majority ethnicity despite the fact that the groups are tremendously different in size. For instance, Pashtuns constitute 32%-42% of the Afghan population while another imperative ethnic group, Uzbeks, makes almost 10%. Nonetheless, this article employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to evaluate how Ghani (Pashtun) and Abdullah (Tajik) articulated their electoral narratives to manipulate ethnic markers to win votes in the past two scenarios of 2014 and 2019 presidential elections. CDA is defined as: “the focal label for a special approach to the study of text and talk, emerging from critical linguistics, critical semiotics and in general from a socio-politically conscious and oppositional way of investigating language, discourse, and communication”.⁴

The Afghan Constitution of 2004 recognised the right to elect and be elected, and provides for the establishment of an Independent Election Commission (IEC) to administer and supervise elections throughout the country. As the parliament was devoid of taking strategic decisions due to its naiveté, electoral laws were enacted through Presidential decrees. However, after the first Parliament came into the 2009 and 2010 Electoral Law continued to be enacted through Presidential decrees, with a negligible consultation from the civil society, political parties or members of Parliament, and other relevant stakeholders.

There is an inherent disconnect between democratic elections and the political structure and processes of a fragile limited access order. Elections by their nature have winners and losers, especially elections to select the head of a government or state. Conversely, the paradox of our discussion narrows down to two distinct

personalities, namely Dr. Abdullah and President Ashraf Ghani, who both hail from two distinct ethnicities and their allies through the electoral process. International analysts have further commented on the state of conducting elections in the midst of a war torn environment and corruption. This article finds that in years following the Bonn Agreement (officially the Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions) in 2001, political elites have been manipulating subsequent vote counts in their efforts to enhance their political power and this practice of yellow politics effectively transpires into mega resultants such as an allied vote. This article further focuses on the relationship of ethnic representation to democracy, in relation to power struggles along with cosmopolitan knots and the possibilities of a political brawl. Hitherto, it is imperative to observe the loopholes in the fleeting democratisation efforts in Afghanistan. Hitherto, foreign interventions brokering power-sharing deals, irrespective of the outcome are detrimental to the political polarisation caused by a heavily centralised presidential system amidst non-constructive nepotism leads to distrust including but not limited to the state and her respective institutions. Such facets of a complex electoral system require assessment through every possible angle, where due to limitations of times, space and content encompasses beyond the scope of this article.

Hitherto, this article is split into three sub sections. The first section assesses how once ethnic issues are consolidated post social disputes and the methodology employed to garner the masses as elites manipulate them in the ongoing electoral and post transition processes. The second section describes both the IEC and ECC Commissioners are appointed by the president following a proposed list of applicants by a selection committee. Individuals submit their application to the selection committee, which then reviews applications based on criteria set in the Electoral Law and prepares a list of names, taking into consideration the highest legal standards, ethnicity, and gender.⁵ The third section assesses the political brawl between Ghani and Abdullah's electoral

narratives and post elections had created the shared government between President Ashraf Ghani and executive chief Abdullah in 2019, one of the important parts of the agreement between them was electoral reform.⁶

Actually, the power sharing agreement itself is a sham to democracy, and should not be tolerated under the current circumstances. This article suggests that in the wake of an international troop pullout, state-mechanism failure,⁷ regional imperatives/social affairs,⁸ and an unstable political economy, a growing resurgence of militias are albeit imperative to the development of an electoral process, as these factors circumvent any development whatsoever. Nonetheless, the issue of the ethnical backlash is at the centre of our discussion, as it is the source of great distrust between the citizens of Afghanistan and a further cause of halting any improvements to the electoral process.

IDEOLOGICAL LIMITATIONS

There are three major ideological limitations as follows:

1. the probability of eschewing the notorious coincidence of an electoral candidate receiving a subsequent number of votes equivocally of “his/her” ethnic constituency in a given province;
2. the exacerbated attitude of the candidates whilst arousing ethnic-sensitive issues, may not willfully and substantially “ethicise” political debate; and
3. the data collection methods are albeit not the best reliable form of information in an electoral context, which is an adherent of a decadent system.

Furthermore, matching a candidate’s narratives with ethnic ties independently is albeit a problem within since “ethnicity, space, and politics”,⁹ for decades, secured the grip of the elites on the society, in the form of warlords, landlords or tribal leader. Espousing this association is in an of itself a challenge for any researcher, when elections are contested in a tempestuous geo-political environment where a country sank under the rubble of

four decades of conflict, yet survived due to her goodwill towards dignity, gallant behaviour of its masses and a firm resolve to survive, any non-discreet variables with electoral laws, and maintain checks and balances on the elites. However, in contexts that are marred by fragility and violent inter-ethnic experience, ethnic identities serve an effective tool for winning influence. In the presidential elections of 2004 and 2009, in every province where a candidate received 90 percent or more of the popular vote, these provinces consisted 90 percent or more of one ethnic group – which persisted in the 2014 presidential elections.¹⁰

The government recommended, similar to the erstwhile paper tazkeras, personal data should indicate categories like name, father's name, grandfather's name, place and date of birth, and residence (current and permanent). However, a heated debate among the MPs ensued, splitting the session between those wanting ethnicity to also be included, those demanding the inclusion of nationality, as the use of the term Afghan came to a debatable spotlight. This petty issue became an issue of ethnic divide as the Pashtun MPs subscribed to nationality using the term 'Afghan' to be included, while the Uzbek MPs demanded only ethnicity to be added, amidst the chaos and the majority of Tajik and Hazara MPs did not prefer both suggestions.¹¹ Nonetheless, some MPs from the latter two ethnic groups prescribed inclusion of ethnicity. This law was hence ratified, as the government suggested (devoid of ethnicity or nationality). However, the process garnered through many controversies including but not limited to political and procedural, post a group of MPs rejected the idea on the basis of national interest.

The suffrage's trust in the polling and election process has been losing especially after the election which is created by a shared government between President Ashraf Ghani and executive chief Dr. Abdullah in 2014, urging the Government of Afghanistan to ensure transparent and credible presidential and provincial elections in April 2014 by adhering to internationally accepted democratic standards, establishing a transparent electoral process, and ensuring security for voters and candidates.¹² The coincidental voting of a

candidate by a suffrage which represents an exclusive ethnicity in a given province is albeit detrimental to the process of electoral reforms in the country. As to 'ethicise' political discourse and place one people against another may prove impossible. Similarly, when a certain percentage of a particular ethnic group in a given province and that percentage of suffrage cast their votes for a candidate, it does not necessarily insinuate with regards to candidate befitted from ethnic supremacy. Subsequently, 90 percent of a province voting against 90 percent of another province adduces the argument against ethnic boundaries.

Similarly, the contrast between vote counts Ghani received in 2009 (8 percent on aggregate) and 2014 (over 90 percent on aggregate) in the same four provinces, might be interpreted as a strong indication of ethnic motivations. A close evaluation of subtexts framed within the broader electoral discourse reveals the centrality of ethnicity in candidates' campaigns as a tool to mobilise ethno-regional support. Another ideological problem is the legal ideologue of such data in a cosmopolitan country marred by large-scale electoral fraud Adding salt to injury are the registration requirements imposed by the IEC are the strictest to be enacted in any Afghan election to date, a factor that has likely contributed to the apparent relative reduction in turnout at the polls when compared to turnout estimates during prior election cycles. In a society that is characterised by social and ethnic divisions, ethnic identities gain momentum to other identities (e.g. Islamic, Hinduism, Sikhism etc).¹³

While there are many more subjects for statistical analysis yet to be fully investigated beyond the initial explorations in this report, there are limits to the insights available from Afghanistan's published electoral data. This is partly due to the many unanswered questions about the details and origins of the data but more significantly to the many political initiatives and forces not captured by the formal electoral system. Elections remain a contested mechanism for apportioning political authority in Afghanistan, and those who participate in them have accepted electoral outcomes only as the opening bid in a continued negotiation that draws on

multiple sources of power and legitimacy. Inter-dependence of the electoral bodies on the influence of tribal warlords, ethnic leaders and terror organisations, marred up with insecurity to the suffrage, vote count has caused a lot of delinquency at the State Level. The War culture of Afghanistan got transformed from Jihad against Soviets to an inter civil war.¹⁴

Afghanistan's location at the "crossroads of empires" has given it a rich cosmopolitan heritage based on Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and numerous local faiths.¹⁵ It is also ethnically diverse, with at 14 ethnic groups identified in the National Anthem although Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek and Hazara predominate. The country's mountainous geography and diverse agricultural base has militated against centralisation, and while the central government has installed provincial and district-level governments, these are dominated by local power brokers who use their status to further personal or tribal agendas. From the Bonn Agreement to the present, the international community and some elites in the Afghan government have ignored the abovementioned utilisation of ethnicity in Afghanistan's political history. These ethnic lines prove worthy of comparison, when war starts, as they unite against a common foreign enemy, then why can the leadership of the country lead them to avoid obstacles in the electoral process?

In this regard, Ibrahimi corroborates on the paradox of over state acting like a control freak of public institutions, as in the case of wartime or during intense electoral mobilisation, is supposed to hype the ethnic tensions. The fleeting government structures in Afghanistan have alluded to the disastrous matters of instability, ethnic problems, racism and social divide. Researchers have argued that where ethnic splits are in place and transition of power enacts in an undemocratic fashion, elites decide the nomenclature of political settlements.¹⁶ Hitherto, the formation of the entire electoral process is now sabotaged by the elites of Afghanistan, as they are working in cahoots to explicitly rule under their rule of law.

Furthermore, the elite manipulation theory establishes the role of elites as to incite ethnic violence for electoral gains,¹⁷ and

exploit ethnic grievances as a maxim of their codified law, as if it were to be a doctrine of precedence.¹⁸ Consequently, the issues of ethnic politics have not been resolved. If this matter remains unresolved, the path to prosperity for the country remains a mystery. With President Karzai and his successor Ghani, both representing the Pashtun ethnicity, there was a golden opportunity to integrate Pashtuns into the state fabric, albeit opportunity lost, due to lack of determination and now Pashtuns are unfortunately equated as part of the Taliban; an accusation not privy to researchers, but a blatant lie to the core. In this regard a plausible solution can be to design a system recognising the rights of all the citizens incorporating Pashtun citizens into the state fabric. With Ghani at the helm, this opportunity not made good use of, the country can delve into a complete state of anarchy¹⁹. According to Snyder, the key most elements in the electoral reform include the restructuring of agencies for increased risk of nationalist conflict during democratisation processes such as elections is manipulation of ethnic cleavages for political purposes.²⁰

Horowitz in recognising connections between ethnic mobilisation and the electoral system employed in specific politics corroborates that no electoral system simply translates suffrage priorities and current bondages of social unity or the existing political party nomenclature, as each electoral system defines and redefines these characteristics.²¹ Multitudes of researches have shed light on the mutual strengthening of causes and resultants between electoral systems, suffrage, elections, and social bondage.²² Hitherto, a nucleus of interrelated factors, including but not limited to security, education, corruption, nepotism, and ethno-political cleavages stimulate the efficacy of electoral development and encourages political elite to address the issues of the suffrage in an appropriate manner emphatic to electoral mechanism.²³

In a post-Taliban Afghanistan, ethno-political leaders and pacts have displayed a disproportionate influence within the political mechanism; albeit an affirmation that subdues ethnic facets. Moreover, Presidential elections of 2004, 2009, 2014 and 2019 subsequently unravel manipulations by the aristocratic brass of

Afghan nobles through the clandestine electoral horticulture amidst ethnic issues to undermine the aspirations of their suffrage.²⁴ Such attitudes impact inter-ethnic tensions, simplifying political stakeholders to hold themselves to ethnic supporters, by delineating the rights of engagement lobbying for a national agenda to be created out of their own vested interests. Finally, electoral resultants are unprecedented by the system, through a broad base of domestic corruption which is the fundamental cause of instability in the Afghan electoral process.²⁵

ETHNIC DIMENSIONS AND THE CRUX OF DEMOCRACY

Our argument stands devoid to the theory that “democracy” is incompatible with ethnic group representation as in the case for the far more developed countries USA, UK and Western Europe have accommodated the masses under the guise of democracy and united them as a single front for their agendas e.g. through war on Iraq, Arab Spring and other nuisances caused by the Western World.²⁶ Our argument stands out eloquently that in Afghanistan relying to ethnic identities and dissemination of power and authority at the grass-roots level upon ethnic lines can further undermined an already volatile situation, reaping havoc across the country. The failings of post-modern representative democracy are highlighted by the decline in voting turnout rates and a high level of dissatisfaction with and distrust of elected political leaders. While advances in technology and the expansion and availability of information can hinder and harm efforts to advance democracy, this article seeks to balance the discourse by emphasising the political mechanisms through exploring plausible solutions towards issues in the public representation.

This is approached through the examination of four areas of enormous innovation and experimentation in utilising nation-states to develop new forms of greater citizen participation within representative democracy and for creating more effective direct democracy: voting from home, scientific deliberative polling, electronic town meetings and direct democracy activities. The main

conclusion is that nation-states has aided forces that favor a stronger influence by citizens in representative government which is already in the process of being transformed as nations garner towards globalisation and the suffrage back on more devolution of power and authority at grass-roots level, including but not limited to self governance.²⁷ These demarcations including classical democracy, liberal democracy, direct democracy, and deliberative democracy have been applied and compared in multiple contexts (Held, 1996).

Since we associate consociational and representative democracy of a considerably reliable model to relate to the case of Afghanistan, our crux of the discourse remains intact to bring about a juxtaposition approach in the paradox of comparisons of the good, bad and ugly of this model relevant within the broader Afghan political writ and signify their implementation in the country. Representative and consociational democracy are considered for advocating harmony and social bonding in cultures where ethnic and tribal associations are beyond compassion of any other matter. Subsequent rallying for this cause can make Afghanistan, a true candidate for this form of democracy, provided it is not loosened up as it is currently in this country.²⁸

ETHNIC OUTRAGES

Hitherto, during the 2019, the Ashraf Ghani's campaign was keen on exploiting the Pashtun victim card, as they were perceived as the oppressed ones, due to the Taliban majority associated to them. Ashraf Ghani's stance was compatible with the ongoing theories of Pashtun banishment, and hence he did convince a large sector of the suffrage to rally behind him for the quest of the Pashtun survival.²⁹ During a campaign trip to Kandahar on 28th of March 2019, Ghani boasted about his dramatic role in getting the Taliban to come to the table for negotiations at Doha. In this electoral speech, Ghani furthered his claim and stated: "... We will release more of these [Taliban] prisoners ... and will not allow prisoners to be used as a business commodity".³⁰

Such sort of lop sided campaign gave direct signals to other communities including but not limited to Hazaras, Tajiks, Uzbek and other minorities, that their salvation cannot be guaranteed under a Pashtun administration, led by Ghani. Hence it came as no surprise that the Ashraf Ghani campaign was flabbergasted at their dismal suffrage gatherings in Hazara-dominated regions in the primaries and hence the entire camp was forced to reevaluate its exacerbated campaign mechanisms.³¹ Hitherto, Ghani's campaign developed a nascent strategy that implicated his stance on the issues that were of significant concerns to the Hazaras including but not limited to commercial investments, labour market supply, education and construction of highways and dams in their regions of their dominance and provide a durable solution of the Kuchi-Hazara cultivation and land issues. The message was relayed through an intensive campaign vide billboards, radio broadcasts and social feeds in the densely populated Hazara-regions.³²

The rival camp of Dr. Abdullah, took extraordinary precautions on this matter, as he being a Tajik and representative of the former Northern Alliance teamed up on 2nd February 2019 by launching a large gathering in Kabul. Abdullah and his deputies made all other minorities play the victim card, that if the non-Pashtun suffrage votes for his campaign and if at all they come to power under Abdullah, they will relinquish the divide forever and make all ethnicities dwell as one. Although this tactic demonstrated a clear ethno-regional comeback but back fired terribly as the masses were more convinced by the Pashtun-dominated government. Dr. Abdullah's rehearsals were primarily fortified by this large scale sense of deprivation including marginalisation of the Non-Pashtun suffrage and his electoral ideologue was garnered under the banner of wiping out evils of the past government, with highly influential quotes as "putting an end to social injustice", and "ending the systematic exclusion of the mujahedeen who fought the Taliban and al-Qaeda".³³ Dr. Abdullah kept up the same ideologue as of 2009, 2014 campaigns, stating: "The people who freed the country from the Soviets and led the war on terror [Taliban] have

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been marginalised. You will see a bright future in which every citizen will have an equal opportunity. The era of injustices and hegemonic control of the state by a single network will be brought to an end”.³⁴

Hence when parliament ratified a vote of no confidence for all Hazara and Uzbek ministerial-nominees, a regressive remorse emerged amongst elites and media which contributed to a further divide in ethnicities. A Hazara MP expressed this fear arguing: “a collective refusal of nominees of particular ethnic groups [Hazaras and Uzbeks] is a clear indication of ethnic discrimination. This causes an ethnic agony that could hamper the prospects of national cohesion”.³⁵

CONCLUSION

The simile of the current situation in Afghanistan can be compared to another dramatic scenario of the mid-20th century, when in the erstwhile British India, two notable lawyers Indian lawyers fought for independence alongside one party and at the 11th hour, they were separated on religious-ethnic demands. The case of Nehru and Jinnah can be brought to light, when both of them due to personal differences led two different political parties into independence of their country, but which ended up created a divide one cannot bear.³⁶ Similarly, the duo in Afghanistan has twice shared power through brokerage by the USA and foreign powers. We sincerely hope that the rift between two individuals does not become a life threatening situation for the people of Afghanistan, as due to the mismanagement of the electoral process at least four times; the hopes of the Afghan suffrage are buried beneath the surface. Unless and until a systematic effort is garnered to salvage the situation, the fate of Afghanistan lies in the limbo. In 2019, yet another power sharing agreement has caused tremendous disarray amongst the masses and hence, situation has to be redeveloped to meet the expectations of the common Afghan Citizen. Through the publication of this article, the researcher, who himself is a patriotic Citizen of Afghanistan appeals to the governing elite of our country to please unite the people and bring

back the glory of this beautiful homeland of ours by inculcating a progressive electoral system which can be a source of determination for further achievements and not as a circumvent to progress itself.

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