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How Political Exclusion of the Public Has Contributed to Afghanistan's Political Instability

*¹Sabawoon Durrani

About Article

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About Author

¹ American University of Afghanistan,
Kabul, Afghanistan

Contact @ Sabawoon Durrani
sabawoondurrani@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The history of Afghanistan shows a constant cycle of political exclusion, where monarchs, warlords, and foreign-backed leaders have always made the political decisions. Meanwhile, the general population has never had actual chances of political participation. This study examines how the exclusion of common Afghan people from power has contributed to the long-term political instability in Afghanistan. This study examines how the governance of elites has continued in Afghanistan, even as the country appeared to experience some political reforms. It follows this course from the monarchy to the current Taliban regime. The study also shows how foreign intervention, ethnic division, and institutional weaknesses have helped deepen the existing exclusion in the political system. Based on historical analysis and comparative case studies, this paper suggests decentralization of power, civic education, and reconciliation as the prerequisites for constructing a more inclusive political system in Afghanistan. Methodologically, this study uses a historical-qualitative approach combining archival analysis, primary political texts, and recent comparative case studies. Key findings show that the dominance of elites, the complicity of foreign actors, and weak civic education have deepened political exclusion. The study emphasizes the necessity of decentralization, civic education, and grassroots reconciliation to develop inclusive governance.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan has gone through many years of war and conflict, but what makes it unusual is that throughout its history, the common people have hardly ever had real control over the country's political decisions. Afghanistan has shifted from one form of government to another in history, from monarchies and technocratic republics to warlord states and most recently, the Taliban regime. For all of these changes in power, there has been one consistency that common Afghans have never really controlled their political destiny. The historical exclusion of people from the politics of the country has been a root cause of the nation's ongoing political instability. This article explains how history and power structures have kept ordinary Afghans out of politics. It argues that the politics of the country has mostly been shaped by elites such as kings, military leaders, or foreign supported rulers, without truly giving people a voice and choice.

Afghanistan's political course has been shaped to a large degree by internal and external political elite and leadership, and the wishes of the vast majority of its population have been overlooked for the most part. As the masses have been denied access to the process of governance, the country has had a weak and unstable political culture with mistrust, sectarianism, and violence.

This paper explores that political instability in Afghanistan is a direct consequence of the long tradition of exclusionary politics. The paper will describe how the cycle of political exclusion has bred national non-cohesion and discuss how the exclusion has had an impact on governance, political culture, and development in Afghanistan. Lastly, the paper will describe ways and recommendations for the building of a more inclusive political system, one capable of ending the pattern of destabilization and enabling Afghans to take back their role in determining their national future.

1.1. Research gap

Existing research on Afghan state formation and instability has heavily focused on foreign interventions, warlordism, and institutional collapse. Far less has been written on the continuity of exclusionary rule across all political orders, from monarchy to Islamic Republic to Taliban, and on how such continuity has structurally affected inclusive political development. Furthermore, while numerous proposals for reform have been proposed in policy and donor communities, few are based on the real political experience and attitudes of ordinary Afghans or situated in comparative political development.

1.2. Objectives

- i. To analyze the historical roots and evolution of political exclusion in Afghanistan.
- ii. To assess how external actors and internal power elites have sustained elite-driven politics.
- iii. To evaluate the consequences of exclusion on governance, identity, and political culture.
- iv. To propose pathways for inclusive governance grounded in Afghan realities and comparative evidence.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Afghanistan's political instability has been a subject of concern for policymakers and scholars for past few decades. The exclusion of common Afghans from politics is one of the most important causes of the political instability of the country. While much of the existing literature has examined in extensive detail elites, warlords, and outside actors and their contributions to the shape of Afghanistan's politics, they have all overlooked the exact mechanisms by which exclusion led to the instability. Barfield (2010) adds that monopolization of authority in the higher ranks, either within the monarchy or subsequently in the Taliban state, effectively excluded the Afghan masses from politics. The elite-centric model of governance is a running theme in Afghan political history, an indication of a deep-seated culture of exclusion (Smith, 2019).

Rubin (2002) further observes that in spite of the external imposition and implementation of democratic processes, political participation has been limited to a select group of people, and there has been a disconnect between society and the state. In this context, the absence of active political participation by the common Afghans has sustained a continuous process of disillusionment and distrust that is counter-productive to state-building and democratization. Furthermore, studies conducted by Mukhopadhyay (2014) and Giustozzi (2009) indicate that foreign-supported governments, especially those that have ascended to power after the first Taliban rule, have pursued such a cycle of exclusion based on reliance on warlords and local elites. These elites work for their personal interests, and it destroys national stability and political fragmentation.

If we look at the recent studies by Transparency International (2024) and Pherali (2018), the citizen exclusion process has many negative effects on governance structures. When only a few people control politics and ordinary people have no real way to take part, it obviously leads to corruption, weak institutions, instability and no accountability. Behera (2023) also supports this with the point that exclusion generates cynicism and disengagement among the people, and a healthy democratic culture cannot be built in such communities.

Comparative political case studies of Rwanda's post-genocide Gacaca justice system (Clark, 2010), the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa (Gibson, 2004), and Iraq's post-2003 invasion transitional governance (Dodge, 2005) illustrate how exclusion in post-conflict societies more often lead to ongoing fragmentation and mistrust. Such parallels enhance the generalizability of the Afghan case by illustrating how prolonged exclusion works against nation-building in other post-conflict settings as well.

Literature shows that exclusionary politics in Afghanistan is not a coincidence but an outcome of Afghan governance structure dynamics. Future studies need to take an interest in experimenting with more inclusive models of governance, especially the ones reaching out to the local population and the underlying causes of political exclusion.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research follows a historical-qualitative approach to analyze the nature of political exclusion in Afghanistan and its



effects on consistent political instability. The study is primarily conceptual but uses different empirical sources, including archival records, primary political texts, policy documents, and expert interviews, to prove its claims. The methodological design combines historical analysis, comparative case study evaluation, and document-based content and discourse analysis to offer a comprehensive and contextually strong explanation of elite-led governance and exclusionary politics in Afghanistan as a primary cause of the political instability of the country.

First, the study explains the historical patterns of exclusion from the monarchy to the Taliban regime using archival material (e.g. state proclamations, historical speeches), and primary political texts, including constitutional drafts and government communiques. Complementing these are foundational secondary sources, including Barfield (2010) and Rubin (2002), that place exclusionary practices within regimes in context. Finally, an in-depth ethnographic interview with a local war commander was carried out in February 2025, providing direct testimony on wartime governance, elite legitimacy, and exclusionary practices at the local level. This anonymized interview adds qualitative richness to the study by grounding more general political narratives in lived local experience by a person involved in a political shift of the history.

Second, the research draws on comparative case studies, like the decentralization reforms in Indonesia (Aspinall and Fealy, 2003) and post-genocide reconciliation in Rwanda (Clark, 2010), to situate the Afghan experience in a wider post-conflict governance context. The cases were chosen purposively for their thematic utility and offer a window into different governance paths after conflict. Based on structured comparative analysis, the research extrapolates possible lessons for institutional reform and reconciliation in Afghanistan.

Third, a systematic review of reports from organizations like Transparency International, UN agencies, and peer-reviewed research (e.g. Goodhand and Hakimi, 2014; Pherali, 2018) was carried out. These offered important evidence on governance performance, corruption, civic engagement, and institutional legitimacy. Discourse analysis was used on speeches, political rhetoric, and state narratives to follow how exclusion is replicated through institutional language and symbolic governance routines.

Analytically, the research uses a content-discourse hybrid approach to analyze exclusionary patterns within state-building discourse, elite legitimization strategies, and institutional arrangements. Such multi-source triangulated approaches guarantee conceptual rigor whilst locating theoretical arguments within recorded empirical facts. By doing so, the paper addresses the journal's methodological requirements whilst informing scholarly and policy-making debates on inclusive governance in post-conflict environments.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this research shows the political exclusion in Afghanistan, which has been a persisting reality under different political systems. In Afghanistan, power has remained in the hands of a few through different regimes from the monarchy to the Taliban, and the common people haven't had an actual part in the politics. The mentioned exclusion has impacted

significantly on the political evolution of Afghanistan, resulting in the lack of trust in government institutions, breakdown of national identity, and continuation of political instability.

The study reveals that in spite of intervals of reform, like the short republican period of Sardar Daud Khan and the post-2001 era of the Islamic Republic, political authority has tended to remain in the grasp of elite groups. Rubin (2002) argues that the political shape of the Afghan state has followed a "twin elite" model, through which both local warlords and leaders supported by outside powers have controlled the country's politics, and they have limited the space for broader public involvement. Consequently, this has led to the growth of corruption, cronyism, and clientelism, because political posts and resources has been allocated more for personal and political affiliation than professionalism or the interests of the public.

Moreover, the findings of the study show that the lack of civic education and political consciousness has exacerbated the deep-rooted exclusionary system. Pherali (2018) further advances that the low levels of political participation among Afghans have contributed to a general sense of political alienation and disillusionment. This issue is further aggravated by the underdeveloped education system that has been incapable of equipping citizens with the information and skills necessary for effective participation in politics.

The study once more underscores the agency of external players in shaping the political form of Afghanistan. Foreign intervention, particularly by the United States and the Soviet Union, has played a major role in entrenching an elite-based politics. Barfield (2010) and Mukhopadhyay (2014) both argue that international leaders have, in most cases, prioritized the formation of relationships with Afghan local elite forces over the promotion of democratic institution building, thereby establishing increased political exclusion of the average Afghan citizen.

In summary, the results of this study show that political instability in Afghanistan cannot be explained by external factors, such as foreign intervention. Instead, it is internally ingrained in the exclusionary nature of its political system. The dominance of elite-driven politics, combined with limited political participation and civic education, has created a self-perpetuating cycle of instability that has continually hindered efforts to establish a stable and inclusive political order. For Afghanistan to move toward stability, it is essential to address these core issues by creating inclusive political institutions that empower ordinary citizens and ensure their representation in the political process.

4.1. A history of power without people

Afghanistan's political history has been one of power distributed between elites like monarchs, warlords, or foreign-backed authorities, and the masses have had little control over political processes and decisions. The monarchy, which ruled Afghanistan until the early 1970s, is a prime example of a political system whereby the decisions were made by a royal house who derived their legitimacy through dynastic rule rather than through democratic engagement with the Afghan people (Barfield, 2010). While there had been examples of modernization in the sense of infrastructural building as well



as efforts at reforms of the state, such reforms never had the intention of empowering the Afghan population. Rather, they had the intention of strengthening the existing elite system of power and held the rest of the population politically excluded. The brief republican period under Sardar Mohammad Daud Khan provided a brief glimpse of change. After overthrowing the monarchy in 1973, Daud Khan proclaimed the Afghan nation a republic and presented a new political vision. In 1977, he gathered a *loya jirga* comprising 352 elders who adopted a new constitution providing for a strong presidency and formal civil liberties, including universal suffrage and minority protection (Dupree, 1978). Daud Khan made visible efforts to broaden the legitimacy of the state by appealing to technocrats, ethnic minorities, and provincial elites and by investing in development, schools, and women's empowerment as a means of expanding the reach of the institution of the state and building trust (Rubin, 2002).

Daud Khan also aimed to remove Afghanistan from Soviet influence and advocated for an independent, non-aligned foreign policy while maintaining a centralized statist system (Smith, S. S., 2019). However, these reforms remained largely top-down and authoritarian. Political opposition was prohibited, and no mass participatory institutional channels existed for ordinary people. When Daud Khan accepted political pluralism and gave permission for political parties to operate, it was completely abused by foreign-supported political leaders and agendas. Although Daud Khan allowed political engagement, the people were still mostly excluded from politics and, due to their limited political knowledge, were manipulated by leaders working for foreign agendas under the banners of nationalism and Islamism (Ethnographic Interview, Local War Commander, February, 2025). After a period of ideological instability and political debate, his regime was overthrown during the so-called Saur Revolution, an actual rebellion and catastrophe, in April 1978, and the brief republic collapsed as a new era of violence and fragmentation began (Rubin, 2002).

Political power was even further decentralized during the 1980s. The regime under the support of the Soviets employed military repression and centralization and alienated large areas of the population. When the opposition became stronger, the power was increasingly vested in provincial warlords who relied on military power rather than democratic power. The commanders held territories as mini-states supported by outsiders and made decisions without any input from the locals (Mukhopadhyay, 2014). Although they were framed as revolutionary leaders, these warlords largely functioned as militarized elites with no real accountability to the Afghan people.

The rise of the Mujahideen following the Soviet invasion further entrenched elite-based politics. Although started as national liberators and freedom fighters, the Mujahideen became deeply fragmented and self-interested, frequently engaging in internal warfare over territorial control (Ethnographic Interview, Local War Commander, February, 2025). Their governance structures were informal, and decisions were made through power and tribal networks, often marginalizing local populations (Giustozzi, 2009). Rather than unifying Afghanistan under a national framework, Mujahideen commanders ruled through violence, corruption, and exclusivity, establishing parallel

authorities that functioned outside any formal democratic or representative system.

Taliban's rise to power in the 1990s was no different in the pattern of exclusion. The Taliban emerged as a purifying agency and functioned as puritan regime eliminating opposition and removing women and minorities from the public sphere. The regime was maintained by fear and coercion but never by the wish of the democratically adverse population (Ethnographic Interview, Local War Commander, February, 2025). Once again, power was claimed in the name of the people, but never shared with them.

After the U.S.-led intervention in 2001, many hoped that the formation of the Islamic Republic would mark a break from exclusionary politics. A new constitution was adopted, namely elections were held, and international aid flowed into state institutions. Yet despite this appearance of democratization, power remained in the hands of returning warlords, foreign-backed leaders, and bureaucratic elites. Accountability was directed upwards, to donors and patrons, rather than downwards to Afghan citizens (Rubin, 2002; Mukhopadhyay, 2014). While the Islamic Republic introduced formal mechanisms of representation, the political system remained elite-driven in practice.

Under President Hamid Karzai, warlords were often appointed to key positions in the government and security forces, perpetuating a power structure based on militia loyalty and regional patronage rather than on technocratic merit or popular mandate (Goodhand and Hakimi, 2014). Karzai's attempt to build a "big tent" government resulted in institutionalizing violence-based legitimacy, as many officials continued to rule through informal networks and local strongmen (Giustozzi, 2009). Later, during President Ashraf Ghani's term, political appointments increasingly favored experts and technocrats with dual citizenships, so-called "Tommies," who were often viewed as detached from the realities of everyday Afghans and lacked legitimacy among the local population (Mukhopadhyay and Johnson, 2022). Despite Ghani's rhetoric and promises of reform and anti-corruption, the era was plagued by a deeply entrenched administrative mafia, where appointments and contracts were governed by favoritism, ethnic calculations, and elite bargains. Administration gave false promises and worked against the will of the people. (Transparency International, 2021).

Since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, political exclusion has taken a new shape. Although the group portrays itself as a national government, it has systematically limited access to state positions to members of its own ranks and loyalists, excluding former bureaucrats, minority groups, and civil society actors. The new regime has prioritized ideological conformity over inclusivity, further narrowing the base of governance and replicating the patterns of elite-driven politics under the name of religious unity (Ruttig, 2022).

4.2. The Cost of exclusion

The long-term exclusion of common Afghans from political power has left bitter and lasting marks on national identity and popular trust. For decades, the Afghan state has been experienced as an instrument of elite preservation rather than



as a collective national project. Transparency International places Afghanistan on its global top-ten list of corrupt countries (Transparency International, 2024), in continuation of the long-standing story of dark governance and elite arrogation of impunity. This has fostered political loss of faith across the board as citizens widely perceive the system as fixed and unresponsive (Behera, 2023). Writing as the Afghan system was hollowing out under the Karzai regime, Barfield (2010) notes that when institutions have no real avenues for popular participation, the state becomes hollow and illegitimate in the popular mind.

This lack of agency has likewise engendered a political exclusion culture in society. Afghan citizens have learned early on, often from childhood, the futility of raising their voices as well as where the real power is located: with the few. Political passivity consequently becomes self-perpetuating as citizens refrain from participation, expectations are weak, and transformation increasingly remote. This mindset is not hardwired but is culturally constructed as a result of persistent exclusion (Almond & Verba, 1963). Under such an environment, even when opportunities for action are available, citizens won't even see them or avail themselves of them.

Exacerbating the issue is the underdeveloped and fractured education system. The country has one of the lowest adult literacy rates globally, particularly amongst women and those from rural areas. Low access to quality education, especially political and civic education, leaves large numbers of Afghans without the awareness or self-esteem to engage with political institutions (Davies, 2005; UNICEF, 2018). Without civic literacy, citizens cannot make responsible decisions, hold power in check, or demand accountability. Correspondingly, illiteracy and ignorance fuel cynical approaches and facilitate governance along the lines of patronage and tribal networks.

These administrative gaps provide fertile ground for informally powerful brokers. When the civil conflict and reconstruction took place, the warlords and patron-based elites occupied the space of governance, governing by loyalty rather than law and by financing from abroad (Mukhopadhyay, 2014). These parallel structures undermined the power of the central government and divided legitimacy of the state, solidifying the political norm as warlordism.

Finally, the price of exclusion is a politically divided, civically disengaged, and institutionally distrustful society. If we want to rebuild Afghanistan, reform must begin with the formal structures of institutions but must also address the psychology of exclusion that has molded the rulers as well as the ruled.

4.3. Why afghans have never had power

The Afghans' political exclusion is not an accidental occurrence but the outcome of long-term historical forces and institutional barriers. Unlike nations which evolved toward participatory government through the formation of independent institutions and civic organizations, Afghanistan was deprived of the opportunity to naturally evolve a representative political system. Institutions like independent media, political parties, or functional local councils, foundations of democratic engagement, were poorly established and worked for foreign agendas (Barfield, 2010). Political power in Afghanistan has

forever been top down, personality driven, and resistant to accountability mechanisms from below.

Foreign interference has compounded this problem. Outside powers throughout history have also mostly favored elite deals over participatory practices, from the colonial engagement of the British to the ideological imposition of the Soviets, and then the liberal democratic reshaping sought by the United States (Rubin, 2002). These interventions were usually triggered by strategic or ideological motives, and their collaborations were usually established with powerful leaders rather than the populace. Consequently, political legitimacy was outsourced, and the population felt itself increasingly disconnected from state formation (Long, 2013).

The politicization of identity has also complicated the situation further. Instead of promoting one national political consensus, various Afghan governments have employed ethnic, tribal, and sectarian cleavages as tools of governance and fragmentation. Ethnicity ceased to be simply a matter of identity, and it became a source of political capital, employed as a means of mobilization, as well as division (Turton, 2003). In such a situation, inclusive institutions could not take hold. The potential for cross-ethnic cooperation was nipped in the bud, and national unity gave way to competitive factionalism. Democratic norms were therefore not just missing but were structurally impossible.

4.4. Towards a people-centered future

We cannot change Afghanistan's political direction just with passing new laws or holding regular elections. Afghanistan must make some fundamental changes in its system and in people's mindset, considering that many people have been left out for decades. Meaningful improvement will only happen if the government is based on getting everyone on board, involving people, and winning the trust of communities.

A major reform is the political power rebalancing from Kabul, currently Kandahar, to the provinces. Absolutely centralized governance has previously estranged the population from outside the capital, perceiving the government as far removed, corrupt, and not accountable. Creation of locally elected councils or *Shuras* شورا that reflect ethnic, gender, and geographical diversity can provide the citizens with a stake in their matters. Real authority concerning budgets, services, and security needs to be devolved to such councils to prevent the establishment of symbolic institutions. The decentralization framework implemented in Indonesia following the collapse of Suharto exemplifies the capacity of empowering local governance to enhance stability within precarious states and mitigate conflict (Aspinall & Fealy, 2003). In Afghanistan, it is essential that decentralization be adapted to align with local customs and sociocultural contexts to achieve substantive implementation.

The institutional change by itself is insufficient because centuries of citizen exclusion have eroded civic engagement. Most Afghans, especially the young generation, have not actually experienced real political participation and thus do not view politics as an active sphere of engagement. The absence of civic knowledge therefore necessitates a comprehensive investment to enhance political education. The inclusion of civic education in the national curriculum, alongside the utilization of mosques, community centers, and media to promote adult



education, can provide the cultural bases necessary for citizens' participation. Citizens must not only learn about how things operate there but also the mindset that one's voice is important. As Arendt *et al.* (2018) note, political engagement is enhanced not only through possibility but through self-assurance and perceived efficacy.

The issue of national reconciliation is also most pressing. Afghanistan cannot go forward without coming to terms with its divided past. A locally owned and driven truth and justice process can offer a space for victims to be heard, collective acknowledgment of harm committed, and a basis for future coexistence. Rwanda's gacaca courts were less than perfect, yet they offered a public space for reconciliation and reintegration (Clark, 2010). Afghanistan needs a process that is not top down amnesty but instead facilitates grassroots healing, particularly across ethnic and generational lines.

Supporting those reforms must be solid guarantees against reconsolidation of elite rule. The establishment of independent bodies of inquiry into corruption, the protection of the local media from suppression, and the inclusion of minority rights in the constitutional fabric are vital components of an inclusive system. The Afghan diaspora, competent, resourceful, and dedicated, has much to contribute here, not as foreigners but as bridges between the best of international knowledge and local action. A politically inclusive Afghanistan is not a fantasy but a political necessity. Unless there is a political formation in which power is not handed down from the top but generated and developed by the people, the nation shall remain incapable of ending its cycles of instability, violence, and elite domination.

5. CONCLUSION

Afghanistan's instability is not the exclusive consequence of cultural failure or geopolitical bad luck. It is the direct result of a political order that has long excluded its people from meaningful participation. Through centuries and regime change, power has repeatedly been concentrated in the hands of elites, too often at the insistence of outsiders, while ordinary citizens have been left on the margins. This exclusion has yielded a society in which trust in institutions is undermined, national identity is fragmented, and political participation is repressed.

An authentic transformation requires more than new elections or reforms imposed from above. It needs to construct mechanisms and a political culture that respects the voice of the people. Decentralization of authority, civic education, and grassroots reconciliation processes are necessary not only as policies, but as foundations of national renewal. Without inclusive governance, Afghanistan will be condemned to repeat cycles of violence and elite domination. But if power is shared, and if politics is made participatory rather than possessive, Afghanistan can start to evolve toward a stable, representative, and self-sustaining future. Finally, I would like to note that it is the duty of scholars and the next generation of researchers to prepare the mindsets of the general public for achieving the necessary changes.

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