

Since 2001, the United States and its allies have involved themselves in matters of governance abroad on account of the perceived nexus between weak statehood and globalized violent extremism.ⁱ Those campaigns have proved profoundly challenging, their failings often ascribed to the weakness of new regimes meant to usher in stability, democratic politics, and liberal governance. The politics of these new regimes are understood to be an existential obstacle to the effort at hand. I employ the case of the post-2001 Afghan government, the first object of intervention in the so-called war on terror, to challenge this near-axiomatic characterization. I argue that state-building in the shadow of counterterrorism is an unprecedentedly constricting form of intervention in which a regime's venality is not a bug but, rather, a feature that stems from the exceptional limits interveners place on the very regime they claim to embolden.

Despite a tendency on the part of scholars and policymakers to compare contemporary cases to those from the Cold War and post-Cold War eras, the "age of terror" is novel with respect to both ends and means because of the perceived threat at hand: intervening states concern themselves, as before, with regimes and insurgents but, of paramount concern are "the terrorists," who represent a distinct, defining actor in the site of intervention. The outsiders, with their counter-terror agenda, articulate the parameters of war-making and state-making even as the ultimate responsibility to manage the threat is thrust upon the insider. In this sense, regimes birthed as a product of this meta-campaign exist in the service of a mission that, at once, necessitates *and* constricts their sovereignty. Their foreign sponsors produce the conditions for this precarity,ⁱⁱ a perpetual limbo that imposes new, exceptionally tight strictures on a regime's capacity to manage contestation, the most fundamental task of state-building.

The venality of palace politics becomes one of the few means for a regime to lay claim to the surrounding political landscape. In this new era of counter-terrorism, the challenges of post-conflict governance, so often laid at the feet of indigenous regimes can be more accurately traced back to the premise of the intervention itself. And, yet, paradoxically, some regimes have managed to employ a brand of palace politics, often disparaged as patrimonial and crooked, to do the vital work of managing the numerous competitors with which they must contend. In advancing the consolidation of state power in these terms, they may have turned themselves, even with one hand tied behind their back, into the very state-builders their patrons desperately seek. A loosening of these strictures on the part of intervening states might, in fact, serve – rather than undercut – the interests of both patron and client by making more room for the kind of competition management required to govern in the midst of profound insecurity.

RENTIER STATE-BUILDING AS THE PRODUCTION OF "PRECARIOUS" SOVEREIGNTY
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Those most concerned with state-building since September 11, 2001 often distill the current challenge into the problematique of the principal-agent relationship. Old-fashioned international state-building involved the manipulation of regimes in weak states by regimes in stronger states. Intervening states sought the establishment of "loyal and politically stable subordinate states" that would do their bidding, often at the expense of sustainable governing institutions and the well-being of their citizenries.ⁱⁱⁱ 21st century incarnations of state-building and its companion, counterinsurgency, in Afghanistan and Iraq, underscore the import of a social contract between state and citizenry, presuming that popular allegiance derives, not only from free markets and elections, but also from the effective delivery of key public goods.^{ivv} This version of the "good governance" paradigm conceives of a host government's interests and impulses as the key obstacles to the elimination of armed contestation that threatens the state.^{vi}

Observers indicted the Karzai government on these terms as the Taliban insurgency erupted and swept across large swathes of the country.^{vii} It was, indeed, the case that the Karzai regime found itself in a fight to survive from the start. But that concern was not independent of the counterterror mission that had empowered this government in the first place. On the contrary, a number of strategic decisions made by the U.S. government and its allies with respect to the country's armed groups shaped the coercive surroundings in which the regime had to exist and operate.^{viii} Moreover, Kabul's capacity to utilize the harder instruments of rule was doubly limited. First, Hamid Karzai, chosen for his profile as a "good" statesman-to-be, had no independent access to coercion in the form of a militia. And, second, the normative trappings of contemporary international state-building would not accommodate a post-conflict regime's use of force to dispense with competitors as state-makers the world over had long done.

Students of the developing world have long pointed to the outsized impact the international system has had on modern state formation.^{ix} What motivated European rulers to grow military, fiscal, and legal institutions – the imperative to compete effectively in the community of other states – has not been at the heart of the modern state-building project, nor is it a necessary condition for state survival in the 21st century.^x Even if the Karzai government had wished to adopt a war footing, its capacity to do so was hampered from the start by the influence of foreign forces as well as international organizations and norms. It found itself engaged, instead, in a new form of *rentier* state-building, positioned to lend its territory to the new international campaign to counter violent extremism in exchange for foreign recognition and aid.^{xixiii}

Unlike most of its counterparts in the developing world, Afghanistan never came under colonial rule, but its history as a *rentier* state dates back to the late 19th century. A little more than a century after the so-called Iron Amir's reign, Hamid Karzai found himself in the midst of a novel exchange with a new foreign patron, the United States. This time, the country's ruler would not have the freedom and flexibility to take on his sundry competitors on the same terms as his predecessors had. The Afghan case represents the pilot for this latest version of international clientelism, which short-circuits the so-called extraction-coercion cycle through the influx of foreign aid as rent.^{xiii} The War on Terror exemplified the malleability of modern Westphalian sovereignty as the United States and its allies set about remaking state-society relations in Afghanistan in response to an attack on the American homeland.^{xiv}

Just as intervening militaries, donor agencies, and international institutions brought the resources to empower Afghans for their country's reconstruction, they also imposed a series of binds on the Kabul presidential palace. In her writing on migration and statelessness, Noora Lori coined the concept of "precarious citizenship" into which governments deposit populations, extracting their labor while withholding final status.^{xv} Analogously, powerful states deposit weak states into geopolitical "in-between" spaces marked by a kind of "structured uncertainty."^{xvi} The weak state is sustained, while the possibility of less tenuity is perpetually on the horizon. So, too, are the threats of a tighter stranglehold *or* precipitous withdrawal.

This precarity meant the Karzai government and its successor would remain perennially and deliberately unable to control many of the basic fundamentals of power and politics even as they faced blame for governing poorly. This young government's Western benefactors complicated the country's already crowded warscape through a series of strategic decisions – to collaborate with the warlord-commanders of the Northern Alliance in 2001; to exclude the decimated Taliban from politics; and to employ the kinetic use of force on their own terms – that

disadvantaged the palace in Kabul in meaningful, lasting ways. At the same time, the normative scaffolding of 21st century state-building imposed a set of “good” governing requirements and restrictions on the Afghan state that further limited its room for maneuver. These constraints – and the precarious sovereignty they produced – help explain the reliance of such regimes on a form of palace politics anchored in the centralized management of rivals through appointments.

STATE-MAKING AS COMPETITION MANAGEMENT

Students of state formation have long-argued that the promise of profit and prestige has motivated strongmen to lay down their arms in favor of joining new forms of order that became the basis for statehood.^{xvii} They have examined contemporary innovations by which politicians leverage their access to state institutions to patronize their clientele and find profit for themselves.^{xviii} Recent scholarship on modern counterinsurgency, moreover, has begun to unravel the narratives about the import and effectiveness of a softer, gentler model of rule.^{xix} The management of competition remains the fundamental task of any regime at the helm of a proverbially weak state. It remained so when Hamid Karzai assumed his role as national sovereign in Kabul’s presidential palace and commenced his historic tenure as Afghanistan’s first elected leader.

That this competition was stoked, complicated, and exacerbated by the very military intervention that brought Karzai’s government to office in 2002, while often overlooked, is a central feature of Afghanistan’s contemporary state-building project. Empirical portraits of state-making lend insight into the dark underbelly of state formation but also reveal the possibility of dividends arising from shadowy dealings that often go ignored in 21st century parlance about governance. They point to one means by which the Gordian knot of endemic (often violent) competition can be cut: the apportionment of spoils through political appointments.^{xxi} Governorships in weak states, I argue, do not comprise the basis for an institutionalized technocracy; nor do they necessarily advance the delivery of services to far-flung communities at the periphery. They serve, instead, as a key means of apportioning power and managing center-periphery relations, especially when other forms of rule are off limits.

On arrival, Hamid Karzai had limited indigenous coercive capability, control over financial capital, or political influence beyond Kabul. But, as a result of the highly centralized formal architecture that has long marked the Afghan state, his ability to appoint, promote, rotate, and remove officials proved a valuable asset in this particular brand of survival politics.^{xxii} In particular, the palace’s capacity to dole out a governorship, “the subnational locus of a ‘government of relationships,’” became a key instrument of rule.^{xxiii} Characterizations like “the mayor of Kabul” betrayed the influence Karzai exerted as a function of these appointments.^{xxiv}

The government unfurled new rules, standards, and institutions, many of which were then ignored or circumvented by the very officials in whose custody they resided.^{xxv} But, if one conceives of appointments as a means of re-engineering rivalries, it becomes clear why strategic opacity and dynamism were of great value. President Karzai had a host of patrons, foreign and Afghan, to please many with disharmonious agendas. He also had a host of clients and potential clients, in Kabul and the countryside, that sought his patronage. It was in this space of competing agendas and requirements where he operated by balancing different camps, playing one against another, and ensuring that they took on each other rather than him. A formal, predictable system would have undermined his advantage as the deciding principal in this

turbulent political environment.^{xxvi} Here, Karzai's method comported neatly with that of other regimes in the developing world, namely "the political instrumentalization of disorder."^{xxvii}

Disguised Warlordism

Perhaps the most striking feature of Karzai's pantheon of governors was the ubiquity of *mujahideen* commanders who had made their names fighting the Soviets, the Taliban, and one another in the two decades before he came to office. Again, their prominence in the political landscape was not an accident; it was the result of a military campaign with their involvement at the heart of its design. Former commanders occupied 68% of the country's governorships during his tenure. Proponents of disarmament, who argued aggressively in favor of a thorough demilitarization of politics,^{xxviii} found their worst nightmare realized. And, yet, the aspiration to banish these strongmen did not acknowledge their (potential) roles in political, social, and economic life.^{xxix} In fact, commander inclusion on this scale could be read precisely as a kind of indigenous DDR program similar to those pursued by other besieged regimes.^{xxx}

Governorships created access for strongmen to untapped business opportunities and engendered political aspirations that required broader, more inclusive strategies. They incentivized good behavior for foreign donor audiences. Governors had opportunities to take care of their own substantial clienteles and to grow invested (both politically and financially) in the success of this regime and, by extension, the Afghan state. Disguised commanders^{xxxi} could, moreover, leverage their informal sources of strength – military, commercial, political, and social – to innervate governors' offices and, through their influence, police stations, district governorates, mayorships, and ministerial directorates. The inclusion of warlords as governors proved doubly valuable to the fledgling government in this sense. Not only did these appointments divert substantial energy previously reserved for a militarized brand of politics to other ends, but they amplified the state's coercive power in the face of more elusive rivals.

Factional and Ethnopolitical "Balancing Acts"

In this matrix of disguised warlordism, the country's two most powerful *mujahideen* factions, *Jamiat-i-Islami* and *Hezb-i-Islami* had an outsized presence. They represented the most formidable camps amongst the *mujahideen* with a famed animosity for one another that nearly tore the country asunder. Close to 45% of the gubernatorial appointments the Karzai regime made empowered members of these two factions. Given the vicious fighting that marked these two camps just a decade earlier, the palace's decisions to populate nearly half of the country's governorships with their members were what Migdal called "balancing acts," political moves that did the work of "balancing large and threatening power centers against one another."^{xxxii}

Both *Jamiat* and *Hezb-i-Islami* were kept inside the tent. They had not accommodated one another in a single government after the Soviet withdrawal and, instead, remained in conflict. Their affiliates now occupied the same rank and file positions in the bureaucracy. And their political fates were now linked to the rise or fall of that president's regime with Karzai as broker, facilitating the flow of political patronage. The country's political landscape was a mosaic of many other armed factions with contentious histories and competing claims. Attention paid to the balance of power meant elaborate calculations on the president's part as he appointed governors; his chosen representatives reflected *and* shaped the provincial and regional spheres of influence accordingly.

Given the factional accommodations that marked Karzai's gubernatorial pantheon, the absence of many Taliban affiliates is striking (by our count, less than 5 of the nearly 200). Shortly after Bonn, a cohort of senior Taliban reportedly reached out to Karzai to acknowledge his anointment and to surrender in the face of imminent defeat. The U.S. Defense Secretary vetoed a truce. Those leaders were subsequently captured or escaped over the border to fight another day,^{xxxiii} many becoming "leading figures in the insurgency."^{xxxiv} Had Karzai been given the leeway to pursue his own modes of accommodation, there may have been few Talibs interested in serving him. Still, one must consider the possibility for any such appointments to have at least blunted the insurgency's virulence or created partners and paths toward reconciliation.

FROM TRADITIONALISM TO TECHNOCRACY?

The governance President Karzai's brand of politicking produced, while fraught for many, helped to ensure the regime's survival at the helm of one of the world's weakest states. But was this approach merely a function of Karzai's idiosyncratic inclinations as a ruler^{xxxv}? Or was it a necessary adaptation to the strictures endemic to this new brand of state-building? How might a more rationalized approach work in comparison? One could imagine no more different a successor to Hamid Karzai than Dr. Ashraf Ghani, who took office in 2014. His first term provides an opportunity to assess the interaction of a leader's particular predilections with the systemic features that structure governance in the shadow of counterterrorism.

Ashraf Ghani built his scholarly and political career on the philosophy that a so-called failed state can be "fixed" through the construction of independent, law-bound bureaucracy.^{xxxvi} His attempt, weeks after taking office, to transform the strategic province of Kunduz into "the pilot test in local governance for the rest of the nation" was paradigmatic of that long-held belief. He not only sent a first-time appointee into this complex, turbulent environment but, then, emboldened the new governor to antagonize those with power and influence there. The results proved disastrous, as the governor's own deputy vowed to take up arms on behalf of threatened militia leaders while the provincial police chief defied the governor's orders.^{xxxvii} Within months, Taliban forces were able to capture Kunduz City for the first time.

Insights from Asia Foundation survey data highlight some of the costs of Ghani's decision in Kunduz. In the two years preceding Ghani's election, 12-13% of survey respondents reported that they "always" feared for their personal safety. Following his election and subsequent gubernatorial appointment, this proportion nearly doubled to 24-25%. A comparison of Karzai's last two years in office with Ghani's first two also revealed a jump from 19% to 39% in the share of respondents marking security and crime as the biggest local problem. Interestingly, perceptions of "good" governance suffered as well: the percentage of those who identified corruption as a major problem in provincial government climbed from 61% to 71%.^{xxxviii}

A full comparison of Ghani's gubernatorial appointees to Karzai's reveal differences of the kind one would expect given their respective proclivities for "technocracy" versus "tradition." Ghani's governors were better-educated – 25% versus 10% with a post-graduate degree and 87% versus 65% with a college education. He appointed, on average, a much lower proportion of commanders to governorships than his predecessor: 37% as compared to Karzai's 68%. Of the various possible traits a governor could possess, the least technocratic was arguably governors with commander backgrounds assigned to rule in their home provinces. 31% of Karzai's governors fit that characterization, while only 11% of Ghani's did.

This technocratic formula did not seem to register as planned with the Afghan citizenry. A higher proportion of respondents (31.3% more) described the country as moving in “the wrong direction” as compared to under his predecessor. More specifically, the percentage of those who identified “security/crime” as the biggest problem in their area jumped from 14% to 21%, an increase of more than half. While other factors may have been driving popular pessimism, it is impossible to argue that Ghani’s approach maintained, let alone improved, the confidence Afghan citizens had in their government.

And, somewhat ironically, Ghani’s approach can hardly be understood in purely technocratic terms; a survey of his key political decisions reveals a more muddled picture. In 2014, he traded in his 2009 campaign advisor, political strategist James Carville, for running mate and U.S. client strongman, General Dostum, who offered him access to the Uzbek voting bloc. And, so, one of the country’s fiercest critics of warlordism now shared a ticket with the country’s fiercest warlord.^{xxxix} A close contest with *Jamiat* heavyweight, Abdullah Abdullah, ended in allegations of widespread fraud and the arrival of U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry in Kabul to settle the stand-off. Once again, an Afghan president would owe his position to intervention by a foreign patron and not without a series of tight strings attached. This coalition government involved the creation of an unwieldy cabal with Ghani at the helm as President and Abdullah in the ill-defined office of Chief Executive. The same array of rivals that had stalked the periphery for decades, once again, laid claim to the political pie. Meanwhile, the Taliban insurgency continued to rage as Western citizenries grew weary of their commitments to Afghanistan.

One of the landmark decisions of his first term in office, Ghani’s reconciliation deal with *Hezb-i-Islami’s* Gulbuddin Hekmatyar – known as “the butcher of Kabul” for his leading role in the 1990s civil war – also represented a remarkably accommodationist overture with echoes of the Dostum vice presidency. Some wondered if it represented “a possible blueprint” for peace between the Ghani government and the Taliban.^{xl} Even a longitudinal breakdown of his gubernatorial appointments reveals an erratic approach with respect, for example, to the role of strongmen. Ghani’s first few years in office (2014–2016) included far fewer strongmen in governorships – only 22% of his appointments. 2017 saw a sharp spike: that year, 55% of his governors had warlord backgrounds, inching closer to the proportion Karzai adopted. In 2018, the number stayed high, at 54%, only to drop in 2019 back down to 29%.

This mixed methodology of rule reflects, I would argue, the impossibility of a seismic shift in governance for the better even with the most committed of Weberian rationalists. Instead, the ongoing strictures of foreign intervention – and the legacies of earlier impositions – saw President Ghani confronting the challenges of a coalition government, the persistent prevalence of strongmen, and the absence of a freehand to engage with insurgents as part of an indigenous peace process. While he exercised his prerogative to appoint governors across the country, his approach did not deviate entirely from that of President Karzai. And, when it did, the results – both on the ground and in the minds of the population – proved problematic on many counts. One might conclude from this comparison that the larger imperative to manage competition under highly constrained circumstances looms large for any regime that finds itself in the service of the Western counterterrorism project. Perhaps more disturbingly, one might even speculate (and this requires further investigation), that a palace that preferences politics over performance may be better situated to serve its own survivalist interests as well as those of its foreign patrons.

ENDNOTES

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ⁱ On this, see Francis Fukuyama, “The Imperative of State-building,” *Journal of Democracy* 15 No 2 (April 2004).

ⁱⁱ Here, I adapt Noora Lori’s use of precarity in the context of citizenship in Noora Lori, “Statelessness, ‘In-Between’ Statuses, and Precarious Citizenship,” in Ayelet Shachar, Rainer Baubock, Irene Bloemraad, and Maarten Vink (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Citizenship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

ⁱⁱⁱ David Lake, “The Practice and Theory of US Statebuilding,” *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 4 No 3 (2010): 257.

^{iv} Lake (2010): 276.

^v Jacqueline Hazelton, “The ‘Hearts and Minds’ Fallacy: Violence, Coercion, and Success in Counterinsurgency Warfare,” *International Security* 42 No 1 (Summer 2017): 80-113. See also, Eliot Cohen, Lieutenant Colonel Conrad Crane (retired), Lieutenant Colonel Jan Horvath, and Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl, “Principles, Imperatives, and Paradoxes of Counterinsurgency,” *Military Review* (2006): 49-53; Austin Long, “On ‘Other War’: Lessons from Five Decades of RAND Counterinsurgency Research” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2006); Walter Ladwig, “Supporting Allies in Counterinsurgency: Britain and the Dhofar Rebellion,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 19 No 1 (March 2008): 62-88.

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^{xii} Rubin, “What I Saw in Afghanistan,” *The New Yorker* (July 1 2015), available at www.newyorker.com.

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^{xiv} Here I use Krasner’s definition of Westphalian sovereignty (“the exclusion of external actors, whether de facto or de jure, from the territory of a state”), which he distinguished from international legal, domestic, and interdependence sovereignties, in Stephen Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, Princeton, University Press, 1999): 4.

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