Ethnic Politics and Political Violence in Post-2001 Afghanistan: The 2014 Presidential Election

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This article evaluates the political dynamics of 2014 presidential election to explore the sense of nationhood that could have formed in post-2001 Afghanistan and to gauge its strength. It examines frontrunner candidates—Mohammad Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah's—campaign rhetoric and processes they utilised to manipulate ethnic identities for political ends. Ethnic identities sharpened by ideological and political polarisation during the civil war (1978-2001), continue to play a critical part in the political economy dynamics of post-2001 era. With the popular patriotic idea of citizenship remaining weak, the abundance of ethnic identities provides a paradigm around which power contenders articulate their messages that easily feed into popular perceptions of 'us' and 'other'. The article contextualises representative and consociational democracy exploring whether these models of democracy offer any solution to social cleavages in Afghanistan. It argues that elites' manipulation of ethnic identities and distribution of resources through ethnic shares (Bonn Conference 2001, National Unity Government (NUG) 2014) might reinforce ethnic boundaries, leading to deeper consolidation of ethnic divisions.

Keywords: *Political violence; ethnicity; identity; elections; ethnic-grievance.*

INTRODUCTION

This article uses 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 2014 presidential elections. CDA is used as 'the general 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'[1] The article finds that in post-2001 years, elites are manipulating certain identity markers in their efforts to enhance their political power that effectively feeds into mass actions. The article focuses on the analysis of new empirical data and relevant literature on elite

behaviour and their implications for inter-communal interactions in Afghanistan where ethnicity, ethnic nationalism, and sub-national identity groups are fluid political forces. The article whilst going down the analytical road that takes up the relationship of ethnic representation to democracy, frames the main research question in relation to power struggles along ethno-regional ties and the likelihood of renewed political violence. It is, however, important to note that there are many contextual reasons why democratisation efforts in Afghanistan are failing. For instance, the intervention's inability to foresee the political polarisation caused by a heavily centralised presidential system and heavy rent dependence of the Afghan polity leaves the recovery efforts prone to competition for different groups/pacts. This would not mean that political groups 'naturally' need to have trust—but in the Afghan case, distrust includes the state and its institutions. Each of these contextual aspects demands assessment in their own rights, which due to space limitation, falls beyond the scope of this article.

The article is split into three main sections. The first section assesses how once blurred ethnic boundaries are consolidated after societal disputes and the way in which ethno-regional factions and elites manipulate them during and after transition processes. The second section presents key similarities and differences between representative and consociational democracy and their potential for addressing societal divisions in Afghanistan, pointing out structural and systemic problems playing out in the country. The third section assesses Ghani and Abdullah's electoral narratives and bring in the conceptual insights on consociational and representative models of democracy to the interpretation of these discourses. The article suggests that in the face of international troop's drawdown, statebuilding project's failure,[2] regional imperatives/geopolitics,[3] and an unstable political economy, a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of societal fabrics and their implications for instigating or mitigating political violence is imperative. A strong state cannot be established only through building institutions, central army and disarming armed spoilers but by overcoming inter-group cleavages and creating certain common values that bind contending groups.

Methodological limits

There are three major methodological limits.

- It is not always possible to exclude the coincidence possibility if a candidate receiving a similar number of votes as is the share of 'his' ethnic constituency in a given province.
- Candidates' behaviour when raising ethnic-sensitive issues may not necessarily and purposefully 'ethnicise' political discourse.
- The reliability of data in an electoral context that is marred by large-scale fraud.

Associating a candidate's narratives with ethnic ties alone is challenging when 'ethnicity, space, and politics'[4] meet in a perplexed political economy dynamics including elections, which are contested in the absence of institutions that can regulate the rules of the game and help keep disorderly elites in check. However, in contexts that are marred by fragility and violent inter-ethnic experience, ethnic identities serve effective tool for winning influence. In the presidential elections of 2004 and 2009, in every province where a candidate received 90% or more of the popular vote, these provinces consisted 90% or more of one ethnic group[5]—which persisted in the 2014 presidential elections.[6] Excluding the coincidence possibility of a candidate receiving a similar number of votes as is the share of 'his' ethnic constituency in a given province, as well as establishing whether candidates raise issues with ethnic dimensions to 'ethnicise' 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 voters casts their votes for a candidate does not necessarily mean that the candidate benefited from ethnic block voting. However, 90% of one region voting against 90% of another is a clear indication of curtains guarding against ethnic boundaries. Moreover, the contrast between vote counts Ghani received in 2009 (8% - on aggregate) and 2014 (over 90% 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 methodological problem is the reliability of such data in an environment marred by large-scale fraud. This article, however, in addition to using elections results seeks to mitigate the issue by using data from an Asia Foundation[7] survey. It improves the reliability and confidence in the data by facilitating validation of data through cross verification from two different sources.

Ethnicity in divided societies

Ethnic identities and nationalism are dynamic—open and vulnerable to construction and manipulation—and have become a fluid political force at times of conflicts and tensions. In a society that is characterised by social and ethnic cleavages, ethnic identities gain in salience relative to other identities e.g. religious.[8] In Afghanistan, after jihad evolved into civil wars the once blurred ethnic boundaries crystallised and became engrained in everyday practices.[9] Ethnicity was increasingly used by warring factions to generate group cohesion to mobilise political support for a political position and against another.[10] In post-Bonn era, ethnicity came to be one of key constituents of politics and communal engagement used by elites to map their social spaces or organise their social and political environment.[11] Ethnicity continues to gain in salience as factions and networks continue to contest over control of the state. Ibrahimi argues that competition over control of state institutions, as in wartime or during intense electoral mobilisation, is likely to increase the communicative value of ethnic identity by creating an environment of pervasive uncertainty.[12] In Afghanistan, state fragility accompanied by pervasive uncertainty has contributed to weakening the role of formal institutions—such as political parties and civil society, which are otherwise placed at the vanguard of organising and aggregating the interests and security of citizens across ethnic and other divides.[13] Scholars have argued that where ethnic cleavages exist and power changes by non-democratic means, elites determine the characteristics and durability of political settlements.[14] In essence, the structural capability of waging contests and the transformational attitudes of elites at times of turbulence can determine the stability and cohesiveness of patterns and sustainability of a society. The elite manipulation theory also argues that elites incite ethnic

violence for electoral gains,[15] and exploit ethnic grievances as a rational and deliberate strategy to acquire or maintain political power and political support.[16] According to Snyder, one of key agencies for increased risk of nationalist conflict during democratisation processes such as elections is manipulation of ethnic cleavages for political purposes.[17]

Social cleavages and preexisting features of political environment form key components of electoral systems, processes, and exigencies. Horowitz in identifying connections between ethnic mobilisation and the electoral system used in particular polities argues that no electoral system simply reflects voter preferences and existing patterns of cleavages in a society or the prevailing political party configuration, and that every electoral system shapes and reshapes these features.[18]. Numerous other studies, too, have highlighted the embedded and mutually reinforcing causes and outcomes between electoral systems, elections and societal cleavages.[19] Thus—a complex nexus of interrelated factors, including security, corruption, political opportunism, and ethno-political cleavages stymies the effectiveness of electoral systems and encourage politicians to behave in a particular way that responds to overall electoral dynamics. In post-Bonn Afghanistan, ethno-political leaders and pacts have displayed a disproportionate influence within the political dynamics - an influence that reflects ethnic proportions. For instance, presidential elections of 2004, 2009, and 2014 reveal how elites/ factions manipulated electoral landscapes along ethno-political grievances to win votes.[20] Such behaviours could result in inter-ethnic immobilism, making it easier and exigent for political parties to limit themselves to ethno-regional supporters, and undermining inclusive engagement around a national agenda harder to crystallise. Thus, electoral outcomes are determined not just by the system, but by pre-existing patterns of social cleavages, whether single or multiple, polar or bipolar.[21] The next section assesses key similarities and differences between representative and consociational democracy, pointing out how structural and systemic problems are playing out in Afghanistan and whether they could be addressed through different political systems.

Ethnic Divisions and Democracy

We do not argue that 'democracy' is incompatible with ethnic group representation e.g. through political parties, other organisations or a grand coalition. We argue that in Afghanistan resorting to ethnic identities and sharing power through ethnic shares could further institutionalise ethnic fragmentations and risk the re-eruption of potential political violence. To contain violence in deeply divided societies, a range of models of democracy, including classical democracy, liberal democracy, direct democracy, and deliberative democracy have been tested and contrasted in different contexts (Held, 1996). Since we find consociational and representative democracy of a relatively clearer potential to adapt to the case of Afghanistan, we focus on the commonalities and differences of these two models and contextualise them within the broader Afghan political landscape and assess their application to the country.

Representative and consociational democracy are praised for promoting peace and social cohesion in societies where ethnic and social cleavages are persistent. These forms of 'Government' promote the spirit of accommodation among the political elites, settle divisive issues where only a minimal consensus exists, facilitate multi-party systems, and bridge the gaps between mutually isolated blocs through effective representation.[22] In contexts where conflicting elite pacts construct the dominant political ideology, manipulate historical narratives, and resort to conflicting ethnic consciousness and loyalties for instrumental purposes, representative and consociational democracy may mitigate social tensions. This is argued to be facilitated through enhanced participation in government by stimulating a 'moderate attitude and a willingness to compromise', and providing 'an important guarantee of political security' among parties and segments that 'do not quite trust each other'.[23]

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Factionalism played out by ethno-regional elites became a key determinant of politics in Afghanistan after the communist-led coup in 1978 and manifested in inter-factional rivalry and violence.[24] The 'disorderly' elite behaviours in Afghanistan have been key obstacles to reaching a political agreement[25] capable of reproducing itself over time and building institutions supported by the general population and whose benefits are

consistent with the distribution of organisational power.[26] Factionalism has led to the consolidation of closed social groupings and obstructed system openness to minority groups and smaller political parties. The absence of a multi-party system contributes to growing ethnic animosity of popular consciousness and political rhetoric. The major political parties in post-2001 Afghanistan (re)formed from the ashes of civil war which continues shaping their behaviours. This is—contrary to the constitution demanding them to be multi-ethnic. Rather these parties have merely 'restructured' to formally meet this requirement while remaining widely ethnic-based.[27] This condition has rendered ineffective the possibility of accommodating conflicting preferences and forming an overriding goal. A multi-party system bears the prospect of lowering the walls of political mistrust and incompatibility that has persisted for long and stymied political parties to function along a national agenda in contrast to ethno-regional platforms. Few long-term national interests and incentives to hold political parties together exist. Political engagement through political parties under a multi-party system promotes competitive elections, creating more engaged voters over a longer period of time. A conducive environment for a wider party and non-party engagement also stimulates a moderate attitude amongst parties to cooperate with greater political interests and confidence.[28] In ethnicised political systems group identities become more concrete and non-negotiable. Hence, disputes among identity groups based on their ethnicity are difficult to negotiate, raising the prospects of violence. Moreover, the low level of inclusiveness of the political system, explains why some countries such as Latin America have a higher incidence of civil wars.[29]

The structural and systemic challenges that obstruct peace and stability in Afghanistan feed into the persistent majority/ minority divide that is being manipulated by ethno-regional political and military factions and elite pacts for instrumental purposes. The majority—minority tensions and struggle over state power and resources has rendered the governance system less advantageous in inviting and coordinating public political activity and participation. Moreover, allocating and equalising resources needed for forming political parties, access to representative forums, and opening them to politically excluded groups such as Sikhs and Hindus,

Balochs, and civil society (media) has been a bone of tensions between formal (state) and other institutions such as Taliban, insurgent groups and political parties. Instrumentalisation of identities in post-2001 era contributes to growing social fragmentation whereas ethnic manipulation and elite contestation over state power and resources have become co-constitutive elements of statebuilding efforts.[30] Elites' failure—manifested through presidential and parliamentary elections—to reach a political agreement capable of producing enduring partnership and spirit of cooperation in political, economic, and social practices, indicate that the country may not reach long-term stability soon.

Another factor that tempts elites to manipulate ethnic identities and drives masses to mobilise down ethnic lines is fear of insecurity. People are much less likely to trust those outside their kinship groups, and much more likely to fear the 'Other' in times of insecurity. The idea of 'ethnic security dilemma'[31] appeals to groups with ethnic, religious, cultural, and lingual differences of greater or lesser cohesion when faced with 'anarchy' due to a state breakdown.[32] Kühn argues that security dilemmas influence political behaviour in post-conflict peacebuilding.[33] According to Kühn, in post-conflict years, risks from extinction to the transformation of a group's socio-political identity and/or of uncertainty about the other's motives regarding expansion, control of sources of funding, or domination within the legal order of the 'state' shape interaction between social actors.[34] Ethnic groups, despite lacking many of the attributes of statehood, may pay attention to the problem of security in the absence of a state. During the civil war 1979-2001, the key components of ethnic security dilemma e.g. fear of loss of group identity, fear of repression of ethnic tradition, fear of physical survival (ethnic cleansings) or prosperity of the community,[35] were frequently referred to by different groups and resonated heavily amongst the population. In post-2001, despite the central state backed by foreign troops to ensure citizens' security, the elements of fear over perceived or real insecurity and politico-economic marginalisation of ethnic groups that constitutes a 'perceptual security dilemma',[36] continues to endure. This fear affects relations among groups and undermines inter-group trust.

Economically, historical contingence played a central role in warfare and influence transitional processes.[37] To contextualise the dynamics of conflict and to reach an effective peace settlement, it is important to consider the political economy of armed intra-state war. Moreover, the actors/factions that struggled over power and resources during wars seek to consolidate their power in post-conflict situation, by expanding control over the local economic and political processes.[38] In Afghanistan, when the state collapsed and civil war ensued, trade in lucrative natural resources, narco-economy, the traditional means of pillage and plunder, diaspora remittances, and the capture of foreign aid constituted critical sources of wars self-financing. In post-2001 era, these 'resource wars'[39] continue to serve the interests of the conflict profiteers to keep the wars alight and to provide a leverage to strike deals.[40] Political economy allows tackling the puzzle of why ethnicity, which is often profoundly divisive during elections, coexist with distinct groups forming inter-ethnic alliances during elections in Afghanistan. Although inter-ethnic alliances have a long history, the present levels and functional imperatives closely derive from contemporary political-economic dynamics. Ethno-regional leaders since the communist coup have sought to secure shares in state power in order to tap into resources to enrich themselves and to serve the interests of their co-ethnic 'micro-societies'.[41]

The challenge of mistrust and conflicting political agendas amongst political parties could be addressed through introducing a multi-party system, where political parties trust each other and help democratisation processes succeed. However, appreciating the idea that generating trust through a system that works to produce it over time rather than requiring it at the outset is a critical step. The country's turbulent history attributed to external interventions and domestic actors' inability to form a consolidated national agenda has reduced the possibility of inclusive parties coming into formation and reaching the desired level of maturity. Rather political interactions and negotiations amongst factions/parties and alliances have formed out of short-sighted incentives. Representative parties play a critical part in promoting inclusive politics. Through promoting civic participation, political parties serve as a point of reference for voters and offer direction to government.[42] Tainted inter-group

relations have halted the consolidation of basic infrastructure of political engagement and communal trust—once established, however, the basics of common interests, trust, national solidarity, and overarching loyalties to national institutions are simultaneously formed. The political systems tested so far have failed to serve as a tool to wedge belligerent parties and masses along a mutually respected cross-community platform for activities and interactions. Developing a political system capable of creating and supporting a shared platform for inter-communal participation has the potential to afford opportunities for all segments of a plural society, including excluded ones who will have the space to develop a sense of loyalty to national interests and reduce the appeal of ethnic affiliations. It is only then that a landscape that has the power of unifying and connecting (through friction or concurrence) the 'fluctuating' 'atomic units' of a society by projecting citizens into a future-oriented perspective.[43]

In the remainder of this section—using discourse analysis—we assess how the two leading candidates employed ethnic-centric narratives articulated around a language of ethnic pride to position themselves temporarily and spatially within the overall electoral atmosphere. A close analysis of these narratives reveals the centrality of ethnicity in political discourses and behaviours in post-2001 contexts. In interviews with authors during the elections, the two candidates' aides explained how the processes of manipulation of identity in the 2014 presidential elections remained at the epicentre of electoral agenda:

> Both candidates refrained from an explicit deployment of ethnic-centric politics but did resort to it indirectly when and as needed. The candidates and their team members would consider their ethno-regional constituencies their winning-cards.[44]

> Although it appears an outmoded practice with a racist overtone to publicly resort to identity politics in campaign narratives, but in Afghanistan's current context, no candidate would ignore it. It is vote-winning magic.[45]

The Ghani-Abdullah Narratives

During the 2014 presidential election, Ghani presented his programmes around five themes: (i) stability and security; (ii) good governance and reform; (iii) justice and participation; (iv) foreign policy; and (v) economic growth and welfare. An analysis of the sub-texts associated with these themes reveals the prevalence of an ethno-regional dimension in the majority of these programmes. In essence, 'specific messages' were projected at 'specific audience' through electoral slogans printed on large billboards and brochures circulated nationwide. The slogans included, 'social justice and social inclusion', 'no citizen will be superior to another citizen', 'no province will be grades 1, 2, 3 any longer', and 'freeing the Hazarajat from the natural prison'. These slogans targeted specific segments of electorates in specific locations. A senior aide to Ghani suggested:

> The most difficult task in developing contents for electoral agenda was to reconcile the conflictive demands most often erected on ethnic grounds.[46]

An Uzbek senior aide to Ghani stated that such slogans transmitted a message to Hazara and Uzbek voters who have been long deliberately disadvantaged by the Pashtun dynasty:

> Addressing and engaging with concerns sensitive to Uzbeks and Hazaras is of critical significance if we are to win the election, as turnout is high in these communities and are inclined to vote largely for their co-ethnic leaders. So it is an effective strategy to mobilise such communities.[47]

An independent scholar in Kabul argued that it was possible to ascertain a certain degree of organisational effort and strategic deliberation premised on identity politics across the electoral discourses, which accounted for the radicalisation of ethnic claims and could turn from ethnic mobilisation to ethnic tensions. He lamented:

> The tactics of mobilising electorates along ethnic ties can be easily contextualised as memories of inter-communal conflicts can tear open the

> wounds and readily translate into actions and reactions of those grieved by the 'other'.[48]

Abdullah was appointed foreign minister at the Bonn conference and was removed by Hamid Karzai in 2006. Eventually, Abdullah turned Karzai's tenacious critic accusing him of excluding other factions, particularly *Jamiat*—(Tajik-dominated) and its military wing—*Shura-e-Nezar*. Abdullah formed the National Front opposition and challenged the incumbent Karzai in 2009 presidential election, finishing second with 30.60% of votes. Mohammad Mohaqqiq, a leader of the Hazara ethnic group who ran in the 2004 presidential election and finished third, supported Karzai in 2009 and would later become a Karzai critic upon his failure to deliver on his electoral promises. To justify his opposition to Karzai after supporting him during the 2009 election, Mohaqqiq adopted a narrative of ethnic bearings and called Karzai 'a president who gave his *qawm* preferential treatments and placed his ethno-regional clients' interests above those of all other ethnic communities'.[49] In another TV talk, Mohaqqiq again accused Karzai of being a pro-Pashtun president arguing:

> When the *Kuchis* [nomads] mingled with their co-ethnic Taliban militias and descended onto the Hazara lands and pastures each spring and cause untold sorrows to the lives of poor and ordinary Hazaras, I persistently ask Karzai to prevent it, but he does nothing. Because he has more sympathy with nomads and Taliban who are armed terrorists and less sympathy for the Hazaras despite their peacefulness and support for the central government.[50]

In 2014 elections, Mohaqqiq ran as Abdullah's second deputy and his support proved critical to Abdullah's electoral success. In the remainder of this section, we evaluate the candidates' narratives around major themes, which they deployed to consolidate ethno-regional support.

Ethnic grievances

The Ghani camp tended to exploit the Pashtun communities resentful of changing power structures they claim to have damaged the grandeur and political hegemony

they traditionally held since the foundation of Afghanistan in 1747. Ghani's electoral narratives were interpreted to have transformed a technocrat to a populist Afghan.[51] During a campaign trip to Kandahar on 28 March 2014, Ghani boasted about his role in securing the release of Taliban prisoners from Bagram Airbase prison. This claim is bold even by Afghan standards and echoes his appreciation of how ethnic and factional appeals have played a deadly role in Afghan power politics. In this electoral speech, Ghani went a step further and stated '… we will release more of these [Taliban] prisoners … and will not allow prisoners to be used as a business commodity'.[52] The ethnic dimension of popular perceptions and elites' identity-driven practices became more blatant when the first-round results failed to produce a winner and a prolonged popular support was needed. Ghani's camp frustrated at their poor performance in Hazara dominated regions in the first round was compelled to recalibrate its campaign strategy.[53] Hence, Ghani's camp developed fresh strategy that explicitly addressed the issues that were of particular concerns to Hazaras such as economic investment and construction of highways and dams in Hazarajat and permanent resolution of the Kuchi-Hazara land/pasture disputes. These slogans were printed on large billboards and displayed in Hazara-populated areas.[54]

Abdullah's team on 2 February 2014—the first day of the official campaign period—organised a large gathering in Kabul. Abdullah and his deputies demonstrated a clear ethno-regional frustration attributed to their political and economic marginalisation by the Pashtun-dominated government. Abdullah's narratives were primarily underpinned by this sense of marginalisation and his electoral discourses were premised on the ideas of 'undoing wrongs', 'putting an end to social injustice', and 'ending the systematic exclusion of the *mujahedeen* who fought the Taliban and al-Qaeda.'[55] Abdullah merely departed from his 2009 presidential election campaign narratives, stating:

> The people who freed the country from the Soviets and led the war on terror [Taliban] have 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.

Abdullah's narratives were supplemented by his running-mate Mohaqqiq, whose speech more clearly showed the exposure of politics to identity and ethno-regional politics:

> The tradition of a 'Big Brother' style control and the single-network monopoly over power and 'national' resources will change. The practice of awarding the contracts worth billions of dollars to one network and one family will end. The tradition of over-allocating budget to some provinces [Pashtun-dominated] and depriving others [non-Pashtuns dominated] will be altered.

Ethnic polarisation persists not only at elite level, endures in other institutions and public venues, too. On 19 January 2015, when parliament passed a vote of no confidence for all Hazara and Uzbek ministerial-nominees, there was a fear amongst elites and media that old ethnic solidarities would be reinvigorated. 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.'[56]

Regional divides

The Ghani-Dostum ticket did not perform as expected in Uzbek-Turkmen regions and culminated in a fierce anxiety.[57] According to an Uzbek MP, the significance of the Uzbek-Turkmen 'vote pact' forced the team to change its strategy and develop new messages designed in a way that would arouse the Turkic communities' sense of being awarded more significance in the future.[58] In this process, the Uzbek-Turkmen were promised that their regions due to their strategic location as a corridor to Central Asian countries would be allocated more resources and would be converted to the gateway to regional trade and commerce that would enhance their economy and empower their peoples.[59] A senior Junbish-e-Milli party member and senior aide to

Ghani explained how his team targeted and mobilised electorates along ethno-regional concerns:

> Election in Afghanistan is a complex yet sensitive issue and is not a reflection of complete nationhood. The candidates find it hard to penetrate other ethnic groups' territories on their own. That is why they enter alliances with people who they might not necessarily find convenient, and are forced to succumb to political marriage. However, there are some signs that inter-group tolerance is growing—albeit slowly. Even elites who once denounced each other are forging inter-group alliances.[60]

Rashid Dostum, Ghani's first vice-president went even further condemning his Uzbek-Turkmen brethren to treachery if they failed to vote for him. 'If you all, Turkic men and women do not vote for me, you have committed treason to your history.'[61] On the day he registered for electoral contest, Dostum bluntly disclosed the pertinacity of ethnic divides that threatened the country, claiming 'had I joined Abdullah, we would have been the uncontested winner, but it would have also led the country into north-south disintegration.'[62]

Abdullah's supporters in the run-off campaigns when the Ghani-Abdullah confrontations reached an unprecedented height organised a large gathering in Herat province, considered a power centre for Tajiks. Addressing the rally, Abdullah repeatedly stated that 'to continue their monopoly on power, they [Pashtuns] have invented mass fraudulent votes. But we [non-Pashtuns] will break this cycle of power monopoly and deliver our peoples the rights they have endured so much pain for'.[63] Abdullah further claimed that 'a calculated regional pride and prejudice in distribution of development aid and promotion of investment' guided governance in the Karzai administration. Abdullah also argued, 'some provinces better connected to Karzai received disproportional privilege compared to others'. This narrative demonstrates that there are visible and invisible sub/national associations of solidarity bound together by ethnic kinship and are instrumental to winning votes that

candidates cannot afford to ignore. A Tajik MP expressed his team's frustration over the alleged attempts by the Pashtuns to curb Tajiks' presence in power in similar rhetoric to that of Abdullah:

> The Pashtuns have ruled and unleashed a monopoly over political, military and economic resources at the expense of other *people's* [ethnic groups]. They [Pashtuns] cannot tolerate others in power who have equally sacrificed for this country. For the past three years, the recruitment of conscripts from Tajik-dominated regions into security sector is officially curtailed on the order of President Karzai and his affiliates.[64]

In essence, with the growth in prevalence of ethnic rhetoric in electoral discourses, the candidates' electoral discourses and rhetoric were increasingly taking a sense of ethnic pride/chauvinism, indicating a real danger that elections could turn into ethnic violence and widen regional divides. In assessing the centrality of ethnicity in electoral narratives and behaviours in the 2009 presidential election in Afghanistan, Sahar argues that 'Abdullah's strategy to reach out to voters hardly extended beyond the *jihad* and resistance against the Taliban, and the history, conquest, and victories which the Afghans take pride in were seldom referred to'.[65] The Crisis Group also raised concerns over increasing ethnic violence in the contexts of *Jamiat-Junbesh* and Tajik-Pashtun confrontations in the north and northeast and warned that the violence could escalate further in future.[66]

Historical narratives of jihad

Ghani, while acted as a technocrat and claimed to present a programme-centred rather than identity-centred policy, he could hardly escape the popular appeal historical narratives pertaining to civil war [foremost fought along ethno-regional ties] carried in mobilising support. Amongst other instances is Ghani's declination to easily let go of the manipulated sense of ethnicity's binding effects in the 'terminology' he used during his press conferences and televised debates. In a televised speech on 14 June 2014, Ghani declared himself 'the candidate of the nation', whilst downgrading

Abdullah to 'the candidate of the *Jamiat-e-Islami'*. Earlier, Ghani had invoked similar spirit of ethno-regional divides contested in the context of civil war stating 'I am not the product of the civil war era. My hands are clean. I have inflicted harm upon no one.'[67]

Ghani meticulously chose the terms that implied identity politics. The civil wars are popularly understood to have been, firstly by Pashtuns, as attempt to restore past hegemonic dominance disturbed by the communist coup in 1978 and *mujahedeen's* ascent to power in 1992. Historically, since 1747 when Afghanistan was founded, there have only ever been two non-Pashtun leaders in power (January – October 1929 and 1992-6). Secondly, other ethnic groups (Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras) view these wars as struggles to consolidate adequate representation. Deploying such narratives helped Ghani disassociate from the civil war in which Abdullah's *jihadi Jamiat-e-Islami* party is generally viewed as the key perpetrator. The Rabbani government (1992-96) and its hegemonic control of the state apparatus is considered by other ethnic groups a period of unmitigated despair during which various parties/factions battered each other at hideous costs to the civilian population.[68] The Tajik domination of key state institutions in the immediate aftermath of post-2001 development culminated in a sense of frustration amongst the more hard-line Pashtuns.[69] Moreover, *Jamiat* and *Shura-e-Nezar* are accused by these hard-liners of targeting and abusing the Pashtuns.[70] This sense of ethnic grievances in the absence of a collectively accepted patriotic idea of nationhood and a rigorous political logic has the potential to turn the tide for political entrepreneurs.[71] As such, it was viewed that despite distancing himself from *jihad* years, Ghani negotiated the co-optation of *mujahedeen* to wield support—in a 'strategic move' to portray a more inclusive picture of his electoral team and to utilise the social capital the mujahedeen leaders/commanders leveraged in their respective ethno-regional networks and communities.[72] Thus—Ghani consistently promised an accommodation of *mujahedeen* factions into political arrangements post-election and the rejuvenation of the status they deserved because of their role in the *jihad* and resisting the Taliban. This slogan largely targeted the Tajik disgruntled factions which felt 'excluded' by Karzai after his election to presidency in 2004.[73]

Similar to Ghani, Abdullah also resorted to *jihad* narratives to influence electorates. In Afghanistan, the Af-Soviet war (1978-1992) resonates widely within the general public, due to its ideological [religious] underpinnings and remains one of the common denominators with which the Afghans collectively identify. Hence, all *jihadi* factions take great sense of pride in their victory over the Soviets. The non-Pashtun factions claim additional pride and popular support—because of their contribution to defeating the Taliban in post-9/11 US-led intervention in Afghanistan. These factions have persistently highlighted this issue and, when needed, have used it as a tool to mobilise ethnic sentiment and support. Abdullah on his ballot paper declared himself as *Jamiat-e-Islami* party's candidate, and throughout his campaigns, Abdullah kept resorting to his party's role in *jihad,* in leading the resistance against the Taliban, and its subsequent exclusion from power. On 28 March 2014 in a campaign rally in Mazaar-e-Sharif, Abdullah said:

> The mujahedeen factions [referring to *Jamiat*] that led the *jihad* against the Soviets to victory and defeated the terrorists [Taliban] have been denied their rights. We will return the glory days to mujahedeen.

After a protracted recount of ballots and eventual political settlement between Ghani and Abdullah, heavily pressured by the U.S., NUG was created. This arrangement of co-governing trapped Ghani and Abdullah in a difficult situation of having to reconcile their differences and manage their promises. However, this practice of negotiation and compromise over state power and resources led to further political divides between the two camps. According to Hazara MP:

> NUG has become a battle ground where different ethno-regional clients affiliated with President and the CEO compete over offices they were promised during elections. President and CEO try to appoint their men to strategic posts where their interests are best served.[74]

The centrality of ethnicity is evident in candidates' use of particular symbols, language and imagery deployed around the multi-ethnic Kabul and other major cities

to motivate electorates outside of the capital's elite circles. Both Ghani and Abdullah used a variety of these symbols, including hat, turban and *chapan*—adorned with intricate threading and worn mainly by Uzbeks on celebration or special occasions. Ghani's pictures in Hazara and Uzbek dominated areas were shown with Hazaragi turban and Uzbek chapan, while in Pashtun-populated areas (capital and provinces), he wore turban. Of more contrast is Abdullah's deployment of ethnic symbols. In the Tajik-dominated areas, he wore *Pakol* hat and tied a shawl around his neck—which became the symbol of Tajik factions during civil war and resistance against Taliban—while on campaign trails to Pashtun-dominated areas, he wore certain types of turban and *shalwar kamiz* clothes often conceived cultural symbols of these regions. This discourse highlights an explicit attempt by candidates to appeal to ethno-regional electorates, while—simultaneously playing national unity. This approach makes it hard to conclude based on the rhetoric of election itself that deep factional differences drive politics. However, election results demonstrate a clearer picture of the nature of factional politics at a local level, suggesting the country is divided along ethno-regional ties. While Ghani-Dostum (Figure1) ticket won most of the Pashtun and outright majority Uzbek votes, Abdullah won most of the Tajik votes in the North. The Hazara powerful leader—Mohaqqeq—won most of the votes in the Hazara-dominated provinces of Dai Kundi and Bamyan. Comparing Ghani's vote counts in 2009 with 2014—although may not necessarily indicate a direct indication of rampant block voting along ethnic ties, as there were totally different elections with different sets of candidates, provides a strong indication of ethnic sentiments during times of power struggles.

****** Figures to be inserted here ******

However, Ghani's win of the most of Pashtun votes—despite his prominent southerner rivals in the first round—including Zalmai Rasul and Gul Agha Sherzai supporting Abdullah in the second round—without doing something spectacular, can be a strong indication of ethnic cleavages at local level. Moreover, electoral discourses were not confined to rival camps, rather were significantly reflected in local media, which is

assessed in the next sub-section.

Local media reflections

Taking a glance at media headlines, columns, and editorials, easily revealed their affiliations with a particular candidate. The media coverage of election heated along ethno-political lines increasingly when the first round failed to produce a winner and the contest spiralled into near-violent confrontation. On 21 June 2014, Pajhwok daily published a column warning that 'the media must not violate the principles of independent and neutral journalism in the heat of elections'.[75] The majority of the local media during the elections took strong 'ethnic pigmentation.'[76] On 22 June 2014, the Independent Elections Commission (IEC) fined 14 TV channels with large sums for failing to adhere to the chart of conduct. The IEC, however, also appreciated media, which took independent and neutral positions. Some independent newspapers while providing a balanced coverage to elections warned that the contesters and their supporters increasingly politicised ethnic identities for political purposes. The editor of a newspaper in Kabul explained how the local media were drawn into ethno-regional networks of solidarity out of political and economic incentives during the presidential elections in 2014:

> The majority of local media acted politically and became bed-fellows with powerful and rich candidates out of various incentives. These media outlets received significant political and financial support and some media proprietors were promised offices in post-election arrangements. I believe, in return these media outlets played a critical part in influencing the electoral dynamics in favour of their patronage. For instance, Tolo Network as the largest and the most influential media in Afghanistan transformed the electoral landscape in favour of Ghani.[77]

Similar perceptions on political stance media took on election were reflected by a media watchdog from the National Democratic Institute-Afghanistan that monitored media coverage of election campaigns. The watchdog argued that 'most of the media

associated with contesting factions took an ethno-political stance on election and their coverage was overwhelmingly biased, demonstrating a chauvinistic characteristic.'[78] The United States Institute of Peace (USIP) assessing the media in Afghanistan reported that the media are not fulfilling their potential as a means to help Afghanistan transition peacefully out of conflict.[79] Other studies that assess the processes politicians have been utilizing media in post-2001 context to influence local and social sources of power suggest that powerful ex-warlords and foes to expand their influence and maintain their grip on power have appropriated much of Afghan media.[80] The case of Afghanistan illustrates that in a context where social cleavages continue to grow, the media could be co-opted and manipulated as a tool for further promoting ethnic and social distinctions. It could be further stated that the 'warlords' and 'strongmen', who are conceiving the seizure of power infeasible militarily, have resorted to the media to leverage propaganda to build influence and public support. In this process, the media sector is viewed to provide a new platform for the powerful—and those seeking more power – to consolidate their positions.[81] Aware of this significance, ethnic and religious leaders are using the media to influence public opinion in favour of narrower and more conservative agendas.[82] Hence, many influential political figures from all ethnic groups run their own media outlets—including TV channels and papers—advocating their own agenda. There is a strong relation between political stability and media landscape in a divided context. Whilst affording an opportunity to shape ideas and consolidate democratisation processes, the media can provide a platform for belligerent groups to reduce the enemy image, generate mistrust and ethic security dilemma.

What is missing and ought to be changed?

In the current perplexed context of Afghanistan, ensuring elections to reflect citizens' will is a lofty aim and remains elusive. The failure of the current political system to address both visible (shattered infrastructures, maimed civilians) and invisible (collapse of state efficacy, mistrust in government, pervasive fear) impact of the protracted conflict calls for alternatives premised on the entry that brings in new ideas and breeds aptitude and collective inclusion. Whilst developing this alternative

is an arduous task that requires patience and skills, exploring other possibilities that reflect the historical context of Afghanistan proffers a potential opportunity. In this process, certain things ought to be changed to respond to the dynamics of social polarisation.

First, the international post-2001 intervention must transcend the procedural-political reforms and sheer technical underpinnings and rather address the features of the political system that allow and have allowed non-democratic regimes to act as a façade of democracy amid deficiencies in popular sovereignty, growing corruption and lawlessness. As such, the intervention should mitigate the bias within the political system (discrimination against ethnic minorities and social groups) that has historically benefited anti-democratic, corrupt oligarchic ruling elites and dynastic power monopolisers that violate the constitution's democratic provisions with impunity. Curbing on elective positions as a means of consolidation of clan and ethno-regional networks of solidarity would foreclose the prospects of ethno-centric and widen those of wider political participation and electoral competition. Regarding elections and their implications for political stability, institutional efficacy in electoral management bodies 'can determine whether an election is a source of peaceful change or a cause for serious instability'.[83] Hence, electoral reforms undertaken by the international community should ensure election commissions' independence and develop their capability and tenacity to ensure credible elections. Strong and effective institutions might discourage elite pacts and ethno-regional factions/parties to negotiate and compromise over state power and resources on their own terms and rather promote mutual trust amongst the ethnic groups and mitigate social cleavages. In other similar contexts, it is argued that while the performance of election-related institutions—particularly the election commissions—was a fundamental reason for the debacle that unfolded in post-2007 elections in Kenya[84], it largely entrenched the popular confidence in elections in Nigeria.[85]

Second, the political reforms currently underway must include a robust partnership between the state institutions, civil society, and the private sector that owns and supports local media. Since a major cost of internal violent conflict is the

loss of community cohesion, and conflict has shown,[86] for instance in Liberia, to 'have broken community and familial relationships and laid waste to the trust in institutions deemed essential to the recovery process.'[87] Similarly, the people in eastern DRC have been described 'as disempowered, marginalised, and impoverished... [with an] absence of viable local government and related services and infrastructure...The result is isolated, fragile communities among some of the poorest in the world, who lack basic services and the social cohesion and capital necessary to mobilise local human and physical resources to meet their own needs.'[88] These communities whilst remaining prone to manipulation by predatory actors can be empowered through inclusion in national programmes to trigger a sense of ownership and confidence and enable them to behave in a way that benefits the wider community such as voting a candidate who offers broad-based agenda and transcends narrow ethno-regional interests. As discussed in the previous sections, whilst partnership overlaps with ethnicity in Afghanistan, it has been heeded little and its significance in improving the quality and extent of participation at the local level has largely been ignored. Moreover, since the Afghan conceptions of political integrity and equitability are deeply grounded in contextual experiences with ethno-political violence, a sustained inclusion of the relevant stakeholders in particular activities, including elections may mitigate the trust deficit in the state and build a national identity that supersedes ethnic and local identities.

Third, to achieve a relative degree of political stability, it is critical to undermine the social roots of the political elites who are shown to occupy strategic positions in the state and influence the formation and functioning of the state.[89] A measure that could potentially help realise this aim is the promotion of a multi-party system to encourage political parties to function in collaboration with each other and communicate their agenda to cross-ethnic constituents. Given the inability of the centralised political system at the expense of a multi-party system to ensure stability in Afghanistan, the development of broad-based political institutions such as inclusive political parties and strong parliament must be supported as key elements of political system. The international partners in Afghanistan are best placed to encourage and

assist—financially and technically—the political parties to recruit from different communities and should help these parties develop the contextually specific infrastructures needed for this engagement. Moreover, the Afghan government and relevant institutions such as the Ministry of Justice whilst encouraging political parties to outreach broader segments of the society, should strictly monitor their activities and if necessary, must hold them to account for irregularities identified in their agenda. Moreover, the assistance (political and technical) provided to the Afghan state by the international donors must include a support for multi-party system and condition the Afghan government to respect and facilitate the inclusion of political parties in national politics. This approach would halt partisan parties from offering multiple political interpretations of inter-ethnic grievances and change the political behaviours that view institutions not as sovereign authorities in themselves but as means of mustering personal and group agendas. In Afghanistan, a political system might work better that promotes open ethnic frontiers and communications and yields confidence in the state, and builds citizenship bound together by horizontal relations of reciprocity and cooperation and not by vertical relations of authority and dependency.

CONCLUSION

This article analyses the underlying political and socio-economic institutional foundations that breed and entrench ethnic polarisation in the political processes in Afghanistan. It assessed how ethnic narratives have fluctuated in strength and importance, usually aligned with levels of insecurity, distribution of state power and resources and group representation after the 1978 coup. Because of the legacies of inter-ethnic wars, particularly the civil wars in the 1990s, ethnicity in the post-2001 reconstruction experiment remains a politically sensitive issue. The article suggests that the patriotic idea of nationhood and the sense of belonging to a consensually accepted overarching national identity amongst the Afghans is still weak. The 2014-presidential election was considered a historic day for the troubled nation to

experience the first democratic transfer of power from one elected president to another. However, the election was marred by large-scale fraud and Ghani was named president without the final output of a vote re-count was released and only after a political and extra-constitutional deal was struck with his rival to share power. The article finds that election patterns and the subsequent turmoil over results indicate deep ethnic divides and threaten the democratisation processes. While Abdullah's team was overwhelmingly Tajik with considerable support from Mohaqqiq's Hazara powerful party, Ghani's team appeared with heavy Pashtun and Uzbek characteristics. This ethnic revulsion on the part of one group against another group is endemic, voting patterns ethnically pigmented, and reflects ethnic loyalties and a kind of communal consensus on ethnicity. The elites' behaviours and political entrepreneurs' predatory approach of arousing the emotive grievance-laden legacies of inter-group living memories and experience remind that the road to overcoming the pervasive ethnic fractures is bumpy and long. The article suggested that political practices and systems through which popular interests are translated into policy, individuals are able to develop civic awareness, and community solidarity is promoted must substitute ethno-regional politics. In post-conflict contexts, a political system that allows all segments to patriciate in decision-making processes and distributes power and resources fairly is key to stability. In Afghanistan, intrastate and ethnically-based conflicts have their roots in unjust political system in which ethnic identity has been a marker of difference and antagonism that privileges some over others. Post-war politics should function based on compromise and tolerance and should be a substitute for factional and partisan political practices. The article concluded that the growing ethnic cleavages that undermine political stability in post-2001 Afghanistan might be addressed through representative or consociational models of political system.

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ethnographic work in Kabul (December 2013 – July 2015). Desk research was supplemented by over 30 interviews with key political figures including MPs, senators, political leaders, campaign managers, civil society members, and leading academics. The authors, to ensure interviewees' safety, have kept their identities anonymous.

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