

The Looming Crisis in Afghan Local Government

by Daniel R. Green

While much of the debate about the war in Afghanistan focuses on troop levels and the pace of the drawdown, a similar reduction of the U.S. civilian interagency may have more far-reaching consequences. Although located primarily in Afghanistan's capital of Kabul, members of the U.S. Department of State (State), U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and other agencies also live and work in the country's isolated districts, rural provinces, and burgeoning towns.¹ These personnel conduct a variety of activities from coaching, teaching, and mentoring local Afghan officials, to partnering with civil servants to facilitate service delivery, to troubleshooting tribal disputes.² In many cases, their advice, resources, and presence provide support to officials attempting to govern a semi-feudal society and serve as the connective tissue for Afghan administrators to their districts, provinces, and national government.³

As the military drawdown continues, a similar effort of transitioning and closing sites focused on good governance, development, and reconstruction activities such as provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) and district support teams (DST) is taking place. These teams, some which have existed since 2002, have played an essential role in empowering local Afghan officials. Removing these resources precipitously will lead to a crisis in Afghan local government. In many respects, the good governance efforts of the U.S. and its NATO partners have masked the critical structural shortcomings of Afghan local government, inhibited capacity development, and papered over crucial weaknesses in Afghan governing, programs, and implementation at the local level.

As the U.S. presence diminishes, these shortcomings will become evident as a mix of tribal and factional rivalries, lack of capacity, weak institutional connections among different levels of government, and a democracy deficit strengthens the powerful often at the expense of the weak and creates opportunities for the Taliban. All told, an impending crisis in local governance is on the

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horizon in Afghanistan and with a development drawdown that is not conditions-based, it is likely that past progress in good governance at the local level could be undone. While decision makers still have time to thwart some of the more devastating effects of a precipitous governance drawdown, absent bold thinking, structural reform, and a willingness to embrace risk, a crisis in local governance will take place, which will further enable the Taliban to reassert their control over the country.

A Brief History of Local U.S. Good Governance Efforts

Once initial combat operations ended in Afghanistan and efforts turned to development and good governance initiatives, the ability of the civilian interagency to operate in Afghanistan's countryside was significantly hampered by a lack of logistical and security support for sustained operations, as well as by the programmatic ability to influence local events ostensibly through national-level programs.⁴ A robust field presence was required. In 2002, the first PRT was established. This civil-military team was comprised of a civil affairs unit, life support, force protection, and interagency advisors who focused on good governance, development, and security.⁵ These small teams were frequently located in provincial capitals and closely partnered with local officials to extend the reach of the central government, mentor government officials, and help establish governance structures while addressing the humanitarian needs of the population. These teams quickly spread throughout Afghanistan, and in 2009, the DST was created to supplement the work of the PRTs. A DST was a smaller element comprised of State, USAID, and USDA representatives located in key districts to focus on the same goals as the larger PRT. These teams brought a variety of skill-sets and resources to the "non-kinetic" fight, including development dollars and expertise; diplomatic skills, including

conflict resolution and cultural understanding; technical expertise in the fields of agriculture, construction, and engineering; political skills, such as fostering government institutions and mentoring leaders; and management and policing skills.⁶ In many respects, these various capacities that focused on empowering local Afghan officials became a crutch that fostered a culture of dependency and masked substantial structural, political, and capacity weaknesses in Afghan institutions.⁷ The sheer ability and energy of well-intentioned U.S. and coalition force civil-military teams prevented the Government of the Islamic Republic of

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Afghanistan (GIROA) from facing the tension between a highly-centralized government with weak local institutions and its decentralized, village-based opponent. As the U.S. presence in Afghanistan diminishes, navigating this process of reducing U.S. good governance efforts while empowering Afghan officials as they fight the Taliban insurgency holistically will assume even greater importance. However, before such an endeavor can be attempted, it is important to achieve a better understanding of the structures of Afghan local government and to gain a more practical perspective on the substance of its work.

Afghan Local Government

One of the central challenges of Afghanistan has been building a viable government at the provincial, district, and village levels that can compete with the Taliban's political program.⁸

While security conditions have long been a limiting factor to the establishment of an effective government in many parts of the country, good governance efforts have been further hindered by Afghanistan's high illiteracy rates, formidable terrain, and lack of trained civil servants.⁹ While the state is quite weak in many areas, it is too strong in others where the central government has so much authority that local initiative is often stymied because provincial officials must secure the central government's approval for actions that should rightfully fall within the discretion of community leaders.

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Afghanistan's "democracy deficit" at the provincial level also inhibits the creation of a dynamic government able to address the concerns of the people. Because provincial governors are appointed by the central government and are, thus, indirectly accountable to the people and often lack direct budget authority and the ability to hire and fire local officials, they are ever mindful of maintaining political connections in Kabul and do not have to be overly concerned with local sentiment. To a lesser degree this is also true of Provincial Councils.

Originally elected in 2005 and then again in 2010, the councils have democratic legitimacy, but because their membership is based on the highest recipients of votes, small tribes are always excluded from political power. Additionally, they lack the legislative basis to compel provincial governors to act and are unable to prompt provincial directorates to respond to their requests. Provincial Councils

are democratically legitimate, politically weak, and frequently ignored. The Afghan people often turn to the Taliban to address injustices or to "right the balance" of accountability and representation at the local level because they are frequently unable to hold corrupt or ineffective provincial officials responsible. Furthermore, this system of government encourages corruption because accountability and responsibility are disconnected, and lacking a viable judiciary and a political party system, local residents have no realistic way of addressing complaints.

Because no formal political party system exists in Afghanistan, an informal network of personal, tribal, factional, and regional groups operate not only within the formal GIRoA system, but also around it to exercise political influence. This informal dynamic is much more agile, better-informed, and capable than the bureaucratic processes of the Afghan State. Similarly, it is far more capable of exercising political influence than most U.S. government agencies ostensibly focused on good governance efforts.

Afghan Good Governance Efforts

The military successes of the Taliban have been due in large part to a lack of security forces in the Afghan countryside.¹⁰ But the armed element of the insurgency was simply, as author Bernard Fall described it, "a tactical appendage of a far vaster political contest and that, no matter how expertly it is fought by competent and dedicated professionals, it cannot possibly make up for the absence of a political rationale." The goal of the GIRoA and the coalition was to create this counter-political rationale for the people by building viable local governments. Community support for the Taliban was due not only to coercion, but also by the natural outgrowth of the lack of a viable, positive, and enduring government program that secured the loyalty of the people. Because the GIRoA was so undeveloped in Kabul and many coalition

efforts were focused on building central government capacity from the start of the war, local government capabilities were largely non-existent, embryonic, or imperfectly mentored. The Taliban took advantage of these weaknesses and stepped into the governance vacuum with their own political program. Additionally, a warlord strategy, adopted in many parts of the country early in the war, alienated the population. Neither the GIRoA nor the coalition addressed corrupt and abusive behavior in a sustained manner, and some portions of the population either sided with the Taliban or tolerated its presence. A new approach that focused greater resources and attention on local governance issues was needed.

Beginning in 2007, the GIRoA created a directorate focused exclusively on empowering sub-national governance to address abuses and to build local government capacity. The Independent Directorate of Local Governance, which answered directly to the President of Afghanistan's office, originally only evaluated provincial and district officials and removed those who were corrupt, abusive, or incompetent and nominated replacement candidates for these positions. It also incentivized good behavior through performance funds and training programs.

As part of the general effort to expand and improve GIRoA's presence in the countryside, President Karzai signed a directive in February 2010 giving the Independent Directorate of Local Governance the authority to coordinate the central government's ministries to provide sustained services through a fully-staffed district government. To support this effort, international donors provided additional funding and redirected their social service programs to support GIRoA's efforts. The mechanism through which this was to occur was the District Delivery Program which was an effort to expand the number of civil servants at the local level, provide them the means to

deliver services, and construct the physical structures they needed to undertake their responsibilities. While conceptually sound, the program suffered from a number of difficulties during implementation in terms of coordinating Afghan and U.S. efforts and was not able to fulfill all of its expectations.

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In 2010, the GIRoA also adopted a new sub-national governance policy that tentatively devolved some budgetary and administrative powers both to the governors of the provinces as well as to their Provincial Councils. While the government continued to be highly centralized, this relaxation of authority incrementally empowered local institutions. The end goal of these various efforts was to create a legitimate, capable, and effective government that would blunt the appeal of the Taliban's shadow government.

The Taliban's Shadow Government

Although the Taliban's strategic goals of uniting the Pashtuns, ejecting foreign military occupation, and imposing sharia law are well known, their tactical political program is less well understood and its popularity among many Pashtuns even more so.¹¹ The Taliban have carefully crafted a political strategy that taps into Pashtunwali traditions; takes advantage of U.S., coalition and GIRoA mistakes; and capitalizes on the weaknesses of the Afghan state in the villages.¹² Though the U.S. has expended substantial efforts to promote good governance in the provinces, its efforts

have been unequal to the task, cumbersome, bureaucratic, and sometimes counterproductive. The Taliban's positive political program has at least five aspects: (1) justice, (2) micro-politics, (3) reconciliation, (4) laissez-faire, and (5) tribal democracy. While the Taliban will impose their will on villagers if required, and they often do so violently, they also have a positive agenda that seeks to entice supporters.

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In the face of corrupt and/or murderous government officials, a non-functioning judiciary, and the perversion or suspension of Pashtunwali traditions, the typical villager has a limited ability to seek justice for murder, theft, assault, rape, and land and water disputes. For the Taliban political agent, this vein of discontent is rich and can be mined by appealing to the structures of justice created by sharia law. While the villager may not be inclined to support sharia law in its totality, he is likely to do so in the absence of a viable alternative. Because the Taliban agent is sitting in the villager's home, solicits his grievances, and then quickly seeks to remedy them, the villager is hard-pressed to support a government that is often distant and abuses its authority.¹³

Along these same lines, the Taliban practice micro-politics to a remarkably high degree of sophistication. The Taliban political agent will find any problem that a village or individual may have and will make it his own. If a village is hoarding water from a stream causing a down-stream village's crops to fail, the Taliban will enlist with the aggrieved party. If a tribe

has been abused by GIROA, the Taliban will join with them to seek justice. This political granularity stands in marked contrast to the frequently inept, ineffective, and insouciant efforts of the Afghan state and sometimes counterproductive work of the coalition. The Taliban's political program is also furthered by their "do-no-harm" approach to the central drivers of local politics and economies. If a farmer wants to cultivate poppy, the Taliban allow it; if he once worked for or supported the GIROA, he is allowed to reconcile with the Taliban; if a tribal leader wants his authority respected, the Taliban will do so if it furthers their agenda. Additionally, if villagers feel that "their" government does not represent them or has unfairly attacked their interests, then the Taliban preach inclusion, grievance, and justice. Against this well-crafted, flexible, dynamic, and pervasive program, U.S., coalition, and Afghan efforts have lagged significantly.

The Taliban's Political Warfare Strategy

If a determined effort is not undertaken to ease the transition out of coalition good governance efforts, while facilitating Afghan control, the Taliban will attempt to re-assert their control. The chief targets of their overtures will be marginalized tribes that have been excluded from political power at the local level. Lacking the ability to either get elected to a Provincial Council or compel the attention of local governments through elections, legislative action, or judicial efforts, these tribes will find the Taliban's message of tribal inclusiveness particularly appealing. Coalition good governance efforts have frequently served as an outlet for grievances for these tribes, and coalition members often intercede with government officials to prompt them to be more inclusive of these political participants. When these efforts no longer exist, the structural disconnect among appointed governors, elected but weak

Provincial Councils, and central government-run directorates will become readily apparent. When it comes to Afghanistan's terrain, Afghan officials are as limited in their movements as coalition officials, so they have come to rely on the air and vehicle assets of NATO and the U.S. While Afghans can assume more of these types of responsibilities, absent an active partner encouraging them to do so, many will cease their activities because they lack the ability to visit more distant districts and villages.

Local governments have also grown to rely on both military and civilian interagency development funding, which has inhibited their ability to understand and use the Afghan budget processes to gain financial support. The PRTs and DSTs have also served as neutral ground for tribes, factions, and villages to air grievances against GIRoA. The Taliban may fill this vacuum. While local GIRoA capacity has also improved, highly specialized skills sets, such as agricultural advice, engineering support, rule of law, and construction, within the PRTs/DSTs have become indispensable for local government officials. Afghan officials will still need to make human capital investments at the local level to establish or continue to deliver services to the Afghan people.

Taliban information operations against GIRoA will continue, and the efforts of PRTs/DSTs to blunt these negative messages will need to continue as well. This holistic approach to confronting the Taliban's political strategy must continue, and coalition forces must have the enduring capability to support GIRoA in its efforts to defeat the Taliban.

A Strategy of Foreign Internal Governance

As GIRoA assumes greater control of its sovereignty and the U.S. presence in Afghanistan diminishes, the ability of Special Operations Forces (SOF) to exercise positive political influence within GIRoA and with the

Afghan people in support of good governance will greatly diminish. This trend is exacerbated by the fact that those elements of the U.S. government that do exercise political influence, such as PRT/DSTs and their civilian enablers, will either disappear or see their presence greatly reduced.

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Since the Taliban insurgency will persist for some time, the need to confront their political arm as much as their military arm will continue for SOF into the future. SOF's flatter organizational structure, constant contact with the Afghan people, and ability to leverage personal relationships to exercise influence enable it to work with the GIRoA at all levels. Even though SOF do not have the same amount of development dollars, diplomatic rank, or sheer mass as the U.S. civilian interagency or conventional forces, they do have a robust tradition of working by, with, and through indigenous institutions. While many of the skill-sets for coaching, teaching, and mentoring indigenous security forces are distinct from those required for working specifically with the political institutions of host governments, there are far more similarities than differences. The ability to build and leverage relationships with both security and government officials within the GIRoA to further the goals of stabilizing Afghanistan will assume greater importance in the next few years. What is required is a new and complementary approach to foreign internal defense (FID) called foreign internal governance (FIG) that seeks to use an integrated influence initiative to prompt GIRoA to defeat

the insurgency's political arm more effectively. This strategy would allow GIRoA to make needed reforms as the shortcomings of local government are revealed. A FIG approach would only require a modest increase in resources because its greatest emphasis is on how U.S. forces are organized in Afghanistan to maximize influence with the Afghan population.

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While much has been accomplished with respect to building the Afghan state, the ability to conduct politics within U.S. good governance efforts has consistently been erratic and more focused on the machinations of political players in Kabul rather than those at the local level most likely to confront the Taliban's political program.¹⁴ The U.S. interagency's approach has proven to be incomplete with respect to prompting the optimal performance of GIRoA, and so a new, complementary effort must be undertaken. Much of the U.S. approach to stability operations has been about doing what bureaucracies are comfortable with, rather than dealing with the problem of insurgency on its own terms. A significant portion of U.S. strategy has been capital centric, biased toward formal government institutions, focused on long-term development versus stabilization, and imperfectly partnered with the U.S. military. In the face of an opponent that blends civil and military approaches seamlessly, is strongest in the countryside, has a nuanced engagement strategy with the local population, and is not suffering from any manpower shortage, one should not be surprised by the problems in implementing a good governance strategy.

However, thinking beyond the limits of bureaucracy and embracing a new approach that institutionalizes state-building programs and puts them on a more sustainable path for long-term development will do much to ensure that the sacrifices of the U.S. military in Afghanistan will not have been in vain. Politics, good governance, and development are too important to be left solely to the civilian interagency in Afghanistan especially as it withdraws from the countryside; it is time for SOF to assume a more central role.¹⁵

What is required is a tightly-organized, vertically-integrated, influencing initiative that seeks to maximize GIRoA performance, especially with respect to defeating the Taliban's local political program, as well as leverage Afghan informal networks that also shape government behavior. This initiative must be able to reach as many villages as possible, continually liaise and embed with government officials, conduct political action, and exercise persistent presence and performance. The current SOF strategy of using an integrated village stability operations (VSOs) approach of District Augmentation Teams, Provincial Augmentation Teams, and regional Village Stability Centers up to the national level is a basic structure which, if strengthened, could provide a light, lean, and long-term capability to undertake the essential non-kinetic tasks that provide stability to rural Afghanistan. A FIG strategy to complement a FID approach through VSOs will provide a means of exercising consistent and positive political influence at all levels of government within Afghanistan. A FIG approach will not replicate the state-building efforts of State and USAID, but it will seek to exercise political influence through embedded mentoring with GIRoA officials, shape GIRoA policy and programmatic outcomes through relationships, and address local drivers of instability through focused attention to the countryside. In many respects,

the organization of civilian and military efforts is the greatest hindrance to how the U.S. operates in Afghanistan, and an integrated approach of this kind will address the incoherency of current good governance efforts. If the U.S. government can improve its organization and then supplement this improvement through better resourcing, it will have done much to stabilize its state-building program as well as ensure that it can marshal a more robust political program to defeat the Taliban. General George C. Marshall commented on his support for putting one military service under the command of another: “We cannot manage by cooperation. Human frailties are such that there would be emphatic unwillingness to place portions of troops under another service. If we can make a plan for unified command now, it will solve nine-tenths of our troubles.” An integrated approach to exercising consistent and positive influence by, with, and through the GIRoA must be better organized and resourced. It will have to blend, as seamlessly as possible, a detailed understanding of the Afghan human terrain with a political action arm able to influence Afghan officials with diminished assets in theater.

Inverting the Development Drawdown

The U.S. government should rethink its current development drawdown strategy of transitioning or closing PRTs and DSTs in outlying areas to eventually collapse their activities upon a small number of regional consulates in major cities. Coalition good governance efforts should persist in less developed areas and transition to Afghan control in more politically mature areas. The principal reason the development drawdown is proceeding in its current form is due to a perceived lack of logistical support for a more decentralized effort. If the drawdown’s structure were reversed and civilian interagency personnel were embedded with SOF in more isolated areas, a more prolonged partnership

with Afghan officials faced with the greatest difficulties of capacity building will continue, and the GIRoA will be better placed to handle a successful transition in areas where it has the most capabilities. Similarly, a FIG strategy will require some degree of civilian interagency support. The U.S. government should consider formalizing a relationship with SOF wherein dedicated interagency advisors from State, USAID, and USDA are assigned to SOF units to provide, at minimum, development, good governance, and agricultural advice but also some programmatic support. This approach will require revising some force protection requirements promulgated by the U.S. embassy, but it will result in a smaller but more highly focused effort to defeat the Taliban’s political program in manner that is highly integrated from the village level to Afghanistan’s capital.

Conclusion

An enduring U.S. presence in Afghanistan that is light, lean, and long-term will require not just U.S. military personnel focused on mentoring and assisting Afghan security forces but also a dedicated effort to exercise positive political influence within GIRoA in support of local good governance efforts. With the civilian interagency focused on a non-conditions-based drawdown, a new effort is required to continue to resource good governance and development efforts with a more agile, better-organized, and integrated-influence initiative for the long term. A FIG effort in Afghanistan will reduce the painful and possibly cataclysmic adjustment of Afghan local institutions to autonomy and self-sufficiency from a precipitous non-conditions-based withdrawal of U.S. mentoring efforts. While it will not be as well-resourced as prior governance endeavors, such as PRTs, it will be situated to exercise influence through existing Afghan structures by leveraging personal relationships versus using development dollars, diplomatic rank, or strictly technical expertise.

This more fiscally sustainable approach that reaches from the central government to the villages will allow local Afghan officials to continue to benefit from U.S. expertise but in a way that clearly puts Afghan officials in the lead. This effort will also allow the U.S. to continue to confront the Taliban's political program and to keep U.S. decision makers both in Kabul and Washington apprised of local developments. As the U.S. continues to draw down its forces in Afghanistan and the Taliban begins to reassert their influence against an Afghan government increasingly on its own, a dedicated security and good governance effort must be made that is light, lean, and long-term that does not abandon the Afghan people. **IAJ**

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