
Summary

Despite his commitment to develop a democratic, modern state, President Hamid Karzai placed many former warlords in positions of power, particularly in the provinces. Many observers, Afghan and foreign alike, have decried the inclusion of warlords in the new governmental structures as the chief corrosive agent undermining efforts to reconstruct the state. Indeed, warlord governors have not been ideal government officials. They have employed informal power and rules, as well as their personal networks, to preserve control over their respective provinces. Informalized politics of this kind is the antithesis of a technocratic, rule-based approach to governance and entails considerable costs, from inefficiency to corruption and human rights abuses.

Nevertheless, some warlord-governors have proven quite successful in areas ranging from security and reconstruction to counternarcotics, as the two discussed in this paper, Atta Mohammed Noor and Gul Agha Sherzai, show. Warlord governance in Afghanistan has involved a messy mix of unsteady formal institutions and powerful informal rules and organizations, but it has proven effective in some cases. The performances of these two warlord-governors have been consistently cited as exceptional amid a largely unimpressive group of provincial governors nationwide.

The experience of Afghanistan and many other states as well as the limited resources available for international state-building efforts suggest that for many historically weak states, a hybrid model of governance that draws on a mix of formal institutions and informal power may be the only viable one. The relative success of the model in some parts of the country demonstrates that the choice in Afghanistan need not be between building a representative, democratic state and allowing anarchic tribalism to take hold. While less than optimal, the hybrid model has proven that it can deliver some goods and services to the population, the central government, and the international community. Given Afghanistan's history of weak central power and its limited resources, the form of governance represented by warlord-governors may be the best compromise at present in Afghanistan.