

# Afghanistan's transition — decentralisation

By Michael A Weinstein

*The most likely future for Afghanistan is chronic instability that Western powers, expending limited resources, will attempt to contain, but will not be able to resolve*

**W**HAT is the other transition — the one in Afghanistan — going to look like, if it occurs at all?

Experts are in agreement that the transition is in trouble. Throughout its history as a field of conflict between contending empires and great powers, Afghanistan has developed a formula for survival that has helped it to keep its territorial integrity and indigenous authority system, despite its dizzying ethnic diversity and the external pressures that have been exerted on it. That formula — a weak central government allowing comprehensive power to local and regional leaders — is always vulnerable to civil war, which has been a staple of Afghan existence and threatens to break out again.

The troubles in Afghanistan and the uncertainty of its transition are rooted in the possibility that the bargains and compromises necessary for restoring the country's political paradigm will not be made or will not be strong enough to prevent relapse into civil war or at best a failed decentralised state, with the national government only fully controlling the capital Kabul, as is presently close to the case.

Afghanistan's history of invasions that kept compounding ethnic diversity precluded the country from achieving integrity through a strong centralised government. Instead, the sense of belonging together was achieved by a complex system of nested loyalties rooted in localities. The unit of Afghan social organisation is the *qaum*, a network of affiliations that is most intense in the family, in which are nested wider loyalties to tribe, clan, occupation, ethnic group, region and finally to the continued existence of the country itself, but not necessarily to the current regime. *Qaums* function to provide their members with mutual aid and to protect them from outside groups. The degree of support and protection is greatest at the local level and becomes more attenuated in broader contexts, in which boundaries

between *qaums* shift in response of changing balances of power.

*Qaums* are societies within a society. They have allowed Afghanistan to survive over centuries, through a common interest in local autonomy, against external threats. Their strength — fierce defence of local control — is also their weakness; each *qaum* is suspicious of the others, and when they cannot agree, they are prone to take up arms. The widest *qaum* — the state, which in the Western model has no structural competitor — is for Afghans a more or less useful facility for other *qaums*, not an object of loyalty or devotion. Afghan nationalism is social, not political.

Since World War II, the attempts to submit Afghan society to centralised rule have been calamities, due to internal resistance and external intervention. The Communist regime, which seized power in 1978 and attempted to impose land reform and secularisation, was met with militant opposition, which brought the Soviet Union into the conflict, leading to a civil war and war of liberation, under the banner of Islam. The opposition forces were aided and abetted by the United States, and were able to overthrow the Communists in 1992, three years after the Soviets had withdrawn their troops. Having won the war, the coalition of *mujahideen* fell apart into the traditional *qaum* pattern, in which authority was now firmly in the hands of warlords, who continued the civil war among themselves.

Concerned about its neighbour's instability, Pakistan supported a movement of Afghan refugee religious students, which became the Taliban militia. The Taliban promised to end the civil war and unite Afghanistan around an Islamist state. The Taliban's victory in 1996 ushered in a period of religious fascism that provided relative security at the cost of state terrorism, but did not break the *qaum* system. When the United States removed the Taliban militarily, because the regime had provided a haven for Al Qaeda before 9/11, the familiar pattern reasserted itself, with civil war prevented only by the presence of multinational forces.

Afghanistan's recent civil wars have left it with a hyper-militarised form of its social paradigm. At present, a weak transitional

government in Kabul led by Hamid Karzai is protected by foreign troops and does not exert effective control over the rest of the country, which is divided among local and regional warlords with primary affiliations to clans and particular ethnic groups. Taliban persecutions and the resentments sparked by civil war have sharpened ethnic divides, lessening the will to compromise. The Taliban have regrouped as guerrilla forces determined to impede the formation of a stable Afghan government. The primary condition for centralised state control

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— the disbanding of local and regional militias — has not been realised: 40,000 to 50,000 fighters are still under the control of the warlords, dwarfing the fledgling Afghan army.

Given the deep rootedness of the *qaum* system and the military power of local strong men, it cannot be expected that Afghanistan will achieve a Western-style market democracy. The most that can be hoped for by the Western powers is some form of bargain among the contending groups to share power through granting one another autonomy. Any greater centralisation is unlikely because the NATO powers are unwilling to expend the resources even to attempt to achieve it.

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It is still not certain that the election will be held, given efforts to sabotage it by the Taliban and warlords who are threatened with loss of their power. Although seventy percent of eligible voters have been registered, the figure is only ten to fifteen percent in predominantly Pashtun areas where the Taliban resistance is active. Where registration has been successful, voters are likely to follow the leads of local strong men, many of whom have been suppressing political opposition.

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Given the deep rootedness of the *qaum* system and the military power of local strong men, it cannot be expected that Afghanistan will achieve a Western-style market democracy. The most that can be hoped for by the Western powers is some form of bargain among the contending groups to share power through granting one another autonomy. Any greater centralisation is unlikely because the NATO powers are unwilling to expend the resources even to attempt to achieve it.

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various forces in Afghan society can reach a  
pact with each other to prevent civil war.

Recent developments in the run up to the  
election show fissures emerging between  
political leaders from different ethnic groups,  
raising the probability that a successful bargain  
will not be made. On July 22, the Uzbek strong  
man General Abdul-Rashid Dostum resigned  
from the transitional government and  
announced his candidacy for president. Five  
days later, Yonus Qanooni, a Tajik who had  
been shifted from the important post of interior  
minister to education minister in an effort to  
satisfy Pashtun interests, declared his  
candidacy. At the same time, the first vice  
president of the transitional government and its  
defence minister, Mohammed Fahim — a Tajik  
backer of Qanooni — was dropped from  
Karzaia's electoral ticket.

In Afghanistan's ethnic demography, the  
Pashtuns constitute approximately forty percent  
of the population, the Tajiks about twenty  
percent, the Hazaras another twenty percent, the  
Uzbeks five percent and an array of other ethnic  
groups the remainder. Politically the groups are  
not unified and their factions cross ethnic lines,  
depending on local issues. Nevertheless,  
Dostum's and Qanooni's candidacies pose the  
possibility that Karzai will not receive a majority  
in the first round of voting and will have to face  
a run off with the second-place candidate.  
Karzai's position is strengthened by his retention  
of Abdul Karim Khalili, a Hazara, as second  
deputy president, but the Hazaras also have their  
own presidential candidate in Mohammed  
Mohaqiq. A coalition of convenience of  
Qanooni, Dostum and Mohaqiq could pose a  
strong challenge to Karzai if he does not win a  
majority in the first electoral round.

If the presidential election is held  
successfully and Karzai wins a clear majority,  
his hand will be strengthened for making the  
deals with warlords across ethnic lines that will  
open the possibility for Afghanistan to regain its  
traditional political pattern of a weak central  
power presiding over strong local power centres  
that are satisfied with their degrees of autonomy  
and their shares of resources and offices. If he  
loses the first round with a plurality and wins a  
run off, he will be in a weaker position and

divisive tendencies will assert themselves. If  
Karzai loses a run off, especially to a non-  
Pashtun, stabilisation will be difficult to achieve  
and renewed civil war will loom as a possibility,  
requiring long term commitment of foreign  
military forces if the NATO powers choose to  
try to prevent that outcome.

Whatever the election's result, certain  
conditions will persist in Afghanistan that have  
international ramifications. The country is  
likely to remain a major provider of heroin, a  
destabilising influence on Pakistan, a field for  
the eastward expansion of Iran's influence and,  
if decentralisation goes too far, a staging base  
for Islamic revolutionaries once again. Those  
conditions will be alleviated by a successful  
political agreement, but they will not be  
eliminated. In the absence of massive economic  
and military aid from the industrial powers,  
which is unlikely to come, Afghanistan will  
remain on the brink of becoming a failed state  
or will become one yet another time.

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Afghanistan functions most successfully  
when the decentralised forces that compose its  
society trust each other sufficiently to  
compromise over common concerns and let the  
rest devolve to localities. The country's political  
system breaks down into civil war when that  
trust is lacking, unleashing cycles of defensive  
aggression. Recent civil wars have eroded trust  
and left authority over the qaums in the hands  
of warlords, who have gained in influence over  
other traditional authorities, especially elders  
and clerics.

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