

Discussion Paper

The *Wolesi Jirga* in Flux, 2010

Elections and Instability I



Anna Larson

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1. Overview

In the lead-up to the parliamentary election scheduled for 18 September 2010, members of Afghanistan's *Wolesi Jirga* (the lower house of the National Assembly) were visibly preparing to subject their seats to the public vote. A top-down view, based on the perspectives of members of parliament (MPs) and new candidates, indicated that, as in any election, this was to be a race of rhetoric, resources and promises of service provision.

In the current context of increasing instability, however, electoral processes do not follow the simple logic of competitive elections in established democracies. As can be seen from a detailed analysis of dynamics inside *Wolesi Jirga* in the months before the election, there are a number of factors at play which render the rules of the electoral game less straightforward than they seem. Without the equal playing fields and knowable, predictable rules in place applying to all candidates, there is a clear disincentive to declare or make public one's political allegiances or party affiliations. This leads to the plethora of "independent" candidates on the ballot papers and a political ambiguity that pervades parliamentary politics.

This, of course, is not a new phenomenon—Afghanistan's recent political history demonstrates a general tendency toward shifting alliances and deal-making behind closed doors. However, in an increasingly unstable environment—in which actors are not wholly convinced that the system will work for everyone in the same way, or will work the same way consistently from one day to the next—elections exacerbate this trend. They impose a race for political capital in a context where this capital is increasingly hard to achieve or maintain, and in which certain competitors have significant advantages over others in acquiring it.

This paper critically analyses the effects of elections in the current context of 2010, with a specific focus on the *Wolesi Jirga*, its members and new candidates. It is part of a series on elections in 2009-10. It draws on extensive research compiling over 200 interviews conducted with MPs, their constituents and new candidates, both at the centre in Kabul and in two case study provinces of Balkh and Paktia. It also exists as a parallel study to another discussion paper in the series, written on elections and instability with a focus on constituent perspectives at the local level.¹

The paper sets out the following key findings for discussion: First, the legislative and executive branches of government have become increasingly intertwined since 2005, and in particular since 2009. While pre-election politicking combined with sincere indignation on the part of MPs toward the government has generated a prominent (and very public) chasm between the *Wolesi Jirga* and the Karzai administration, under the surface exist connections between MPs and the executive that threaten to strip the parliament of any of the monitoring or oversight

¹ These papers are part of a broader study on the parliamentary election, which has adopted two distinct but overlapping approaches. The first approach collected constituent perspectives on the parliamentary election in Kabul, Balkh and Paktia provinces and resulted in two papers: Noah Coburn, "Connecting with Kabul: The Importance of the *Wolesi Jirga* Election and Local Political Networks in Afghanistan" (Kabul: AREU, 2010) and Noah Coburn, "Parliamentarians and Local Politics: Elections and Instability II" (Kabul: AREU, also to be released in September 2010). The second approach complements the first by focusing primarily on MPs' perspectives on and preparations for the 2010 election. A brief paper from this approach was produced in June 2010: M. Hassan Wafaey with Anna Larson, "The *Wolesi Jirga* in 2010: Pre-election Politics and the Appearance of Opposition" (Kabul: AREU, 2010). This paper, also from the second research approach, follows up on themes outlined in the brief. It also builds on themes identified in an AREU issues paper released after the first post-2001 parliamentary elections: Andrew Wilder, "A House Divided? Analysing the 2005 Afghan Elections" (Kabul: AREU, 2005).

capacity that it currently has. Business deals and nepotism in particular thrive between MPs and cabinet ministers, entrenching vested interests and often predetermining the outcome of plenary votes. It is critical that all post-election analysis of the Wolesi Jirga treat its members as inherently connected with the Karzai administration, and also as part and parcel of a broad network of political actors, rather than as an isolated body of representatives protected from the wider sphere of Afghan politics.

Second, these alliances between the lower house and the executive are fragile and subject to a great deal of instability. Moreover, this instability is heightened by elections, which in their most basic definition are designed to promote change and uncertainty of outcomes in the short term. In the Afghan context, it is very likely that the process of elections will be politically disruptive in the short term, with the potential to destabilise local communities. However, if the outcome of elections is not uncertain *enough*—with results predictable and a significant amount of government control over candidacy, vetting, participation and results—elections will not contribute to stability in the long term either.

Finally, the paper addresses the implications of the above observations for the new parliament. In an environment in which the Karzai administration seeks to consolidate its hold over democratic processes, provoking considerable reaction from those excluded from the president's entourage, the role of the Wolesi Jirga post-election will be crucial in determining the trajectory of stabilisation in Afghanistan.

2. Methodology

Five key points to consider when reading this paper:

- Data for this research were collected between January and July 2010 in the form of semi-structured interviews with 42 MPs, selected for their ethnic diversity, varying political stances, gender balance and regional representation. Second interviews were conducted with 15 of these MPs, in order to allow for the updating of information and the following of the progression of certain issues, such as that of cabinet nominee rejections in parliament. In addition, interviews were conducted in Kabul with ten new candidates for the *Wolesi Jirga* election. As such, the data present a broad sample encompassing various and divergent viewpoints.
- Data for the parallel study on constituent perspectives at the local level (focusing on Kabul, Balkh and Paktia) are also drawn upon at times in this paper.²
- When interviewed, MPs tended to use the word “government” to refer specifically to the executive branch and often saw themselves as distinct from “the government” in this regard. As such, in quotations below it is necessary to interpret the word “government” to mean “executive.”
- The paper also draws on information collected for Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) studies on parliament since 2005, and thus is able to provide a retrospective analysis based on continual observation of the *Wolesi Jirga* during its first term post-2001.
- The paper is largely based on the perspectives of MPs on elections. It sets out for discussion some of the key concerns MPs voiced during interviews about the 2010 election, and attempts to situate these within the current context of Afghanistan.

² For more information on the methodology used for the parallel study, see Coburn, “Parliamentarians and Local Politics in Afghanistan.”

3. Introduction to Key Definitions Used

This paper focuses on the ways in which instability affects elections and, in the reverse, how elections can exacerbate instability. Before discussing these issues in some detail, however, in relation to the Wolesi Jirga, it is necessary first to define clearly what is meant in this paper by the key terms used.

The term “instability” is used to denote a state in which the rules of the game (in elections, for example) are not perceived to be fixed or stable by the actors or participants involved. A degree of unpredictability is inherent also: there is no guarantee that 1) the rules apply to everyone equally or 2) they will function consistently from one day to the next. This leads to a situation in which it is in every actor’s interest to keep their motivations and intentions to him or herself, and to remain publically ambiguous on the subject of political allegiances and alignments. Committing to a set of formal rules or procedures when one perceives that no one else is abiding by them makes very little sense. Instability is a negative phenomenon on a local level because it promotes power grabbing and windfall profiteering. In the Wolesi Jirga it is negative because it promotes ambiguity of positions, bargaining, patronage and bribery. In both contexts, it makes political capital harder to achieve and decreases the incentive to play by the rules.

“Insecurity,” by contrast, is used here to denote specifically the threat of violence from outside. While the term may be used in other ways in other contexts, the clear distinction between instability and insecurity is useful for the purposes of this paper. In discussing the context of Afghanistan in particular—where both threaten to disrupt and destroy fragile systems of governance in different ways—the distinction is all the more important.

“Stability,” then, relative to the above definitions, is first knowing the rules of the game and second having the faith that they will not change any time soon, regardless of who or where one is. In the context of elections, it is the knowledge that putting oneself forward allows a candidate (at least in theory) an opportunity to win based on qualifications and political capital.

It is also necessary to clarify that these terms are mainly used in the paper to describe systems, rules and processes—such as elections in themselves—rather than the outcomes of these processes. Incidentally, most constituents interviewed for a parallel study were more concerned about being deprived of a transparent, trustworthy system with a predictable set of rules than they were about being disappointed by the outcome of elections.³ Referring to the uncertainty of electoral outcomes is a different but related issue, which will also be dealt with in this paper. In order to make a clear distinction between processes and outcomes, the term “uncertainty” will be used only to describe the latter. Uncertainty in the outcome of elections is a positive phenomenon, perhaps even the very definition of competitive elections⁴—if elections take place within a stable context in which the rules of the game are widely respected.

3 See the parallel discussion paper to this study for more information on this subject: Coburn, “Parliamentarians and Local Politics in Afghanistan.”

4 For an exploration of this theme, see Adam Przeworski, “Democracy as a Contingent Outcome of Conflicts,” in *Constitutionalism and Democracy*, ed. Jon Elster and Rune Slagstad, 63 (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

4. Brief Background to the *Wolesi Jirga*⁵

The first post-2001 *Wolesi Jirga* was inaugurated in December 2005, following a parliamentary election three months earlier. It included a mix of liberal modernists, party proponents, ex-mujahiddin and religious scholars, covering a spectrum stretching from fundamentalist Taliban sympathisers to journalists, pilots and television personalities. This variety has given rise to heated debates but has not consolidated into formal blocs or groups. The majority of MPs claim to be independent in their allegiances, even if they are widely known to have connections with a party or influential personality.

Parties are represented in parliament, albeit informally. They do not resemble parties in established and/or Western democracies, in that they are largely based on the ethnic ex-military factions that fought in the civil war. While many are taking steps toward reform—for example, in holding party-wide elections for leadership—there remains very little consolidation of issues-based platforms that could reach significantly beyond their ethnic support bases.

Since 2005, a number of developments that are relevant to this paper have taken place. First, conservative voices appear to have strengthened in recent years; this is notable in the debates surrounding the Shia Personal Status Law and suspicion of Afghans converting to Christianity. Second, ethnic identities have been increasingly adopted by influential MPs for political purposes and have become very clearly apparent in relation to issues such as President Hamid Karzai's list of cabinet nominees, which were rejected by some on the grounds that they did not provide adequate representation of minorities. Finally, in the run-up to the 2010 election the increasingly popular stance of "opposition" was being taken up by a number of MPs, although the meaning of this label remains ambiguous. This in particular demonstrates a degree of instability that will be explored further in the following section.

⁵ For a more detailed background of the first term of the *Wolesi Jirga*, see: Hassan Wafaey and Larson, "*Wolesi Jirga* in 2010."

5. Unstable Alliances: Legislative-Executive Relations in 2010

One of the ways in which the instability of the current context can be best demonstrated is through the changing legislative-executive relations since parliament was first inaugurated. The relationship between parliament and the government has been particularly turbulent over the last year, with certain events significantly disrupting legislative proceedings. Accordingly, the number of MPs willing to class themselves as “opposition” was increasing in the pre-election period, with many standing on seemingly anti-government platforms in their campaigns. Having said this, there remains a certain ambiguity in terms of the nature of this opposition, given the vested interests of many parliamentarians in keeping the government—or at least key personalities within it—on side.

5.1 A growing animosity?

Since the presidential and provincial council elections in 2009, and in the run-up to the election in 2010, the relationship between the parliament and the executive appears to have become increasingly strained. Perhaps not unrelated to this is the way in which this relationship has simultaneously developed a very public face, through televised stand-offs and vocal MPs critiquing the government in the media. As a result, a key theme occurring throughout constituent interviews was the potentially destructive tension between the Wolesi Jirga and the government.⁶ This tension was particularly evident in relation to notable events, such as the parliament’s rejection of cabinet nominees.⁷ One MP explained why, from one perspective, parliamentarians did not vote in favour of Karzai’s proposed list of ministers:

The government is doing something unfair in parliament—for example, in the way that it introduced new cabinet nominees. Most of the nominees were unknown to the MPs and they were introduced by the party leaders to Karzai during the election time last year. So it was Karzai’s responsibility to campaign for them in parliament and to tell the MPs why he preferred these candidates for the ministerial positions. This made the MPs angry and most of them rejected the nominees, which is why the opposition in parliament is increasing day by day.⁸

It was widely assumed by MPs that Karzai had promised cabinet positions to members of large ethnic blocs, in return for their support in the presidential race, as pre-arranged with the party or bloc leaders. In May and June 2010 the Wolesi Jirga went on strike, holding only “silent sessions,” to protest Karzai’s delay in putting new nominees forward for the cabinet list.⁹

6 Various interviews, constituents in Balkh, Paktia and Kabul provinces. This was explored in some detail in a previous AREU brief on the subject, in which it was indeed found that a good deal of resentment existed on the part of many MPs toward the government for the way in which they perceived backroom deals between Karzai and the leaders of key ethnic constituencies or parties to have taken place.

7 Karzai first introduced cabinet members in December 2009. In a parliamentary vote on 2 January 2010, only seven out of 24 were approved. Only a week later, the President proposed a new list of candidates for the previously rejected positions, and another vote on 16 January saw ten nominees rejected and only seven accepted from the second list. Parliament then went on recess, and after several months’ delay a further seven nominees were put forward by the President on 26 June 2010. In a vote on 28 June, five were accepted and two rejected. Seven ministerial positions remain unfilled to date and will so until a new parliament is formed.

8 Interview, male MP for Nangarhar Province.

9 MPs began to boycott ordinary duties on 22 May 2010, in response to the delay in submission of the new cabinet nominees list and in order to protest against the presidential decree on the electoral law. Afghanistan

With the deadline for nominations for candidacy in the 2010 election approaching, however, there was some confusion as to whether MPs should register, and thus appear to concede to Karzai's electoral law changes, or not register, and risk missing the opportunity to compete in the polls. First Speaker Yunus Qanooni's reassurance that registering did not equal concession seemed to solve the problem;¹⁰ since his statement to this effect, very little has been said on the subject and changes to the law appear to have been tacitly accepted, for the time being at least. This in itself indicates a clear pragmatism on the part of MPs wishing to demonstrate their distaste for executive control over elections, but nevertheless needing to re-register.

This then points to a more ambiguous relationship between MPs and the government, especially in light of the September 2010 election. The dramatic events of the votes against cabinet nominees and the parliamentary strike in May served critical pre-campaign purposes, given their widespread coverage and public message of legislative strength against a government perceived by many as corrupt. They do not indicate, however, the formation of a lasting, cohesive or sustainable opposition. As will be discussed further below, they are more accurately described as the surface manifestations of MPs' sporadic (and not always sincere) frustration at the parliament's level of dependence on the executive.

5.2 Monitoring deadlock

An overwhelming number of MPs in interviews discussed the inability of the Wolesi Jirga to monitor the executive branch of the government and its activities. The following statement is typical of many MPs' perspectives on this subject: "We should be monitoring the government but the government does not accept this, and does not allow us to take on this role."¹¹ New candidates were also very critical of the incumbent MPs' inability to monitor the government; according to one new candidate, "The parliament has to ask President Karzai before it takes any decisions."¹²

Of course, no government would be particularly favourable to the idea of being monitored; but to interpret these complaints as the result of capacity deficiency, or technical difficulties, or even the stubbornness of a government that wants to maintain control is to miss a critical dimension: the common interest among many MPs in keeping the government on side. While there is a significant expediency in separating oneself from the government rhetorically so as to distance one's campaign from its failings,¹³ there is also a clear advantage in maintaining a certain pliability and receptiveness to the government's offers of support, as one MP for Herat explained:

*The government's influence in parliament is a result of the privileges which it gives to MPs who are close to the government. For example, the government is providing security in the districts where its supporters are campaigning, but not in other districts.*¹⁴

Parliamentary Assistance Project Legislative Newsletter, 24 May 2010, Vol. 3, No.13.

10 Afghanistan Parliamentary Assistance Project Legislative Newsletter, 3 May 2010, Vol. 3, No. 10.

11 Interview, male MP for Kabul Province.

12 Interview, male new candidate for Kabul Province.

13 Hassan Wafaey and Larson, "Wolesi Jirga in 2010."

14 Interview, male MP for Herat Province.

This statement came from an MP who had recently shifted to the “opposition,” and thus needs to be read in that context. Nevertheless, it is representative of many MPs’ statements, and it indicates MPs’ perceptions of what government support for incumbent candidates can or could entail. Security for campaigns is no small advantage to those whose provinces are centres of insurgent activity. Of course, whether these kinds of promises—even if they are made—can be kept is another matter.

5.3 Vested interests

The phenomenon of MPs maintaining an ambiguous position between the government and opposition is an issue that will be discussed in greater depth below. Relevant to this section, however, are the reasons, aside from promises of campaign support, that MPs maintain connections with the government. One of these reasons, as explained by an MP for Balkh Province, concerns the nature of their private business networks:

The Minister of Transport was asked to come to parliament to provide clarification over an issue, and for a vote of confidence. I asked another MP why he voted for this minister in the vote of confidence, and he said that he owned a travel business which required the minister’s support. This being the case, he said he needed to remain loyal to the minister. The nation has to know that there is corruption in the parliament, because they have voted for us...The government is corrupt and so is the parliament. The MPs are even involved with oil and meat contracts. During the day, the MPs criticise the corruption in government but when they go home at night they are dealing with corrupt people.¹⁵

The implied intimate connection between MPs and the executive was mentioned in interviews by a number of other MPs as well. Indeed, anecdotal evidence suggests that these kinds of connections are commonplace and form part of the way in which MPs are able to access services for their constituents, while also promoting their own business interests.

On the one hand, these relationships have generated a fundamental barrier to accountability and monitoring, in that ministers are too easily able to play the patronage card and win support through MPs’ dependence on their continued amity. This barrier is further entrenched by another form of favour-giving, that of employing relatives of MPs in return for a vote of confidence. According to the same MP cited above, this is a frequent tactic employed by ministers to generate support among MPs, as “the majority of active MPs have been given good positions in government for their families.”¹⁶ In so doing, ministers generate an essentially foolproof mechanism through which to guarantee the support of MPs, drawing on cultural norms of obligation and patronage to close relatives.

On the other hand, it is necessary to ask whether this is simply the way accountability works in Afghanistan. MPs’ commitments to securing good jobs for their families in the parliament could easily be extended to members of their *qawm*¹⁷ or village. Accountability networks and MPs’ de facto constituencies are usually not much larger than these *qawm* or wider family groups (especially in rural areas), partly as a result of the Single Non-Transferable

15 Interview, female MP for Balkh Province.

16 Interview, female MP for Balkh Province.

17 *Qawm* is a complex Afghan political and social term that is often simply translated as “tribe” or “clan.” Based on the context in which it is used, it can mean an identity group ranging in scope from family to ethnicity.

Vote System (SNTV) demanding very few votes in order to win seats. Thus, when considering the way in which these connections contribute to ineffective government structures and unqualified employees, it is also necessary to remember the potentially positive way these activities could be seen by constituents directly benefiting from intimate MP-executive relationships.

Due to the lack of records documenting how individual MPs voted on various bills discussed in plenary sessions, the above perceptions of MPs cannot be compared with statistical evidence of voting patterns. At present, only the numbers of red and green cards are recorded in plenary votes. This issue has been discussed among different stakeholders on numerous occasions over the past five years, and the idea of funding an electronic voter registry was put forward but never carried, for various reasons such as the expense and the potential danger to MPs voting on controversial issues such as votes of no confidence for ministers.¹⁸ A system of named ballots in red and green boxes would likely work just as well as an electronic system, but the political will to implement such a system, which would publically expose some of the tight-knit relationships currently existing between the legislative and executive, is missing. Furthermore, in an environment of increasing instability, it is more strategic for MPs to remain ambiguous and keep these relationships concealed, allowing them to keep options open and change allegiances if it would be more expedient at a given time to do so. There is no incentive, at present, to declare one's political position openly and play by the rules of the game, as there is no guarantee that others will do likewise. This has a potentially significant cost in terms of downward accountability to constituents, however, since there is no available information about MPs' activities or voting preferences inside parliament.

18 Anna Larson, "Afghanistan's New Democratic Parties: A Means to Organise Democratisation?" (Kabul: AREU, 2008), 15.

6. Elections: Institutionalising Instability?

Tight-knit as these relationships between MPs and the executive may be, they are subject to continuous flux. None of the aforementioned characteristics of legislative-executive relationships are fixed or certain. Rather, they reflect more generally the ephemeral quality of political connections and allegiances notable throughout Afghanistan's history. Deals, bargains and short-term alliances for political gain have frequently been made by leaders over the last 30 years in particular, and posed nothing new in their most recent manifestation of pre-election politicking.¹⁹

Having said this, the reinstating of democratic institutions, such as parliamentary elections, in Afghanistan, and the renewed commitment to democratisation in the period since 2001, represent an attempt to move beyond the deal-making and deal-breaking of the war years. The intention of introducing elections at this time was to institutionalise uncertainty by providing a rules-based framework for competitive elections, in which the outcomes are theoretically subject to popular vote.²⁰ As stability has decreased since 2004-05, however, and people's confidence in the rules-based system has declined, elections are now serving to compound the problem because the rules themselves are not seen as equally enforced.

Referring to the outcomes of elections, political scientist Adam Przeworski has argued that the institutionalisation of uncertainty is at the very core of countries' transitions from autocratic to democratic regimes; this is because "democratisation is a process of subjecting all interests to competition," and because, through democratisation, "[p]ower is devolved from a group of people to a set of rules."²¹ Indeed, despite the questionable measures certainly employed by many candidates to ensure a successful campaign in Afghanistan's parliamentary polls, the fact remains that they are by constitutional provision obliged to subject their candidacy to the public vote. Nevertheless, it could be argued that in the Afghan case, the trajectory of democratisation is far from established, with the rules often determined by the strongest players and with no level playing field on which the different political actors can compete fairly. The Constitution, moreover, is used to back some political decisions but not others and is selectively used by powerholders when it suits a greater political aim. As such, the process generates instability, and produces outcomes that are potentially predetermined by the strongest players using illicit means to rise above the competition.

In the post-2001 era, democratic institutions, including elections, have been built quickly and unevenly in Afghanistan—as a result, they serve to compound and further entrench the fluidity of allegiances that existed in Afghan politics before they were introduced.²² This is

19 In a previous AREU paper we referred to this as a "culture of political ambiguity." See Larson, "Afghanistan's New Democratic Parties," 12. For more on Afghanistan's recent political history and the shifting nature of allegiances between actors, see Olivier Roy, *Afghanistan: Internal Politics and Socio-Economic Dynamics and Groupings* (Paris: CNRS/UNHCR, 2003), <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/pdfid/3e9ae5535.pdf> (accessed 12 October 2009); Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System, Second Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); and Thomas Ruttig, "Islamists, Leftists—and a Void in the Center: Afghanistan's Political Parties and where they come from (1902-2006)" (Kabul: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2006).

20 Przeworski, "Democracy as a Contingent Outcome of Conflicts," 63.

21 Przeworski, "Democracy as a Contingent Outcome of Conflicts," 63.

22 This is also evident at the local level. See Coburn, "Parliamentarians and Local Politics in Afghanistan."

evident in terms of MPs' perspectives on government-opposition dynamics; in the ways in which the "opposition" movement has splintered; in an ambiguous and unconsolidated "pro-government" group; in the shifting nature of parties and their alliances; and in a general lack of reliability of political stances. While this may be unsurprising, policymakers should remember that, in the short term, elections will not contribute to stabilisation processes, and may, in fact, destabilise communities (and provide the potential stimulus for violence) given how much is at stake in the parliamentary polls.²³ In the long term, however, without a concerted effort by the government and the international community to strengthen and uniformly administer elections now, in preparation and in time for the third round of polls post-2001, they will also continue to interrupt a trajectory of stabilisation in Afghanistan.

6.1 MPs' and candidates' perspectives on shifting allegiances between "government" and "opposition"

The way in which MPs and candidates refer to the shifting nature of political allegiances in Afghanistan, and within the parliament in particular, is indicative of the instability emphasised by elections. This is particularly clear in MPs' perspectives on the "government" and "opposition" blocs, which appear to be continually in flux. The following quotations, from both MPs and candidates, demonstrate this:

*In my opinion there are no opposition and no government supporters in the parliament. If we are to have an opposition in the parliament, we need to have a strategy for it. At the moment they don't have any strategy: one day MPs are in the opposition and the next day they are pro-government.*²⁴

*The opposition that exists is not effective. If they are with the opposition on one side then they are consenting with the government's ideas on another side... There is a silent opposition in parliament that is made up of people working for their own benefits. I mean that in some cases they are in opposition, but when there is any benefit for themselves involved, they are agreeing with the government.*²⁵

*Jabha-i-Mutahid is a...party that has been formed on the basis of [personal] benefits. For example, MPs from our ethnic group are with [opposition candidate Abdullah] Abdullah today but if this position doesn't result in personal benefits for them then they will leave him.*²⁶

These quotations reflect the way in which MPs have in many cases adopted a cynical stance toward the prospect of government/opposition groups in parliament. While the number of MPs willing to categorise themselves as "in the opposition" has been increasing,²⁷ there remains little clarification of the meaning of this stance and also a certain flexibility with which

23 For more on the potential for violence in the aftermath of elections, see Scott Worden, "Afghanistan: An Election Gone Awry," in *Journal of Democracy*, July 2010, Vol. 21, No. 3.

24 Interview, male MP for Kabul Province.

25 Interview, campaign team member for female new candidate, Kabul Province.

26 Interview, male new candidate, Kabul Province.

27 Interview, MP for Nangarhar Province. This was also noted in Hassan Wafaey and Larson, "Wolesi Jirga in 2010."

those MPs approach the term.²⁸ Indeed, it is also convenient to maintain a middle ground, and thus be able emphasise one's opposition to a corrupt government during campaigns, while also drawing on governmental connections (in ministries, for example) to access the resources necessary to attract voters with service provision. In this way, campaigns for elections provide a direct incentive not to align oneself either as an opposition or pro-government candidate.

6.2 Divisions within the “opposition”

Having said this, there are a number of incentives not to align publically with the opposition based on its inherent weaknesses. These include its lack of strong leadership and the damage done to the movement in the cancellation of the 2009 presidential election run-off, as the following quotations demonstrate:

I think Abdullah's role—which was constructive in the last elections—has lost its influence now. Candidates are not supporting him now. If you look at the candidate list, some candidates do mention the parties they are affiliated with but there is no candidate from Jabha-i-Mutahid. Of course, these candidates are participating in the elections but they do not state their allegiance for two reasons: first, the unity of the Jabha-i-Mutahid dissolved when Abdullah stepped down from the run-off, as he lost his support from them; and second, people have suspected from the beginning that Karzai and Abdullah were making compromises with each other, and now they believe this even more strongly.²⁹

Dr Abdullah's party doesn't have any role now, because the leaders have all separated. For example [Burhanuddin] Rabbani has become very close to Karzai, Qanooni is very powerful himself, [General Mohammed] Fahim is the vice president and Abdullah is not powerful.³⁰

We can see that the opposition stands against Karzai, for example when Dr Abdullah boycotted the Peace Jirga and refused to participate. But Rabbani was then the chief of the Peace Jirga, demonstrating that they have a leadership problem and a lack of unity. One of them declares the Peace Jirga as positive, and one declares it negative.³¹

Everything is changeable inside the parliament, outside the parliament and in general across the country because the actors are working without policy and strategy. Candidates can change people's ideas very easily and big actors or players can change MPs' ideas very easily because they are functioning in the parliament without any strategy or plan.³²

Even before the presidential election, presenting a unified opposition stance proved difficult for the Abdullah camp, as negotiations with the leaders of Hazara and Uzbek ethnic groups failed and they chose to align with Karzai. After the cancelled run-off, however, public

28 Hassan Wafaey and Larson, “Wolesi Jirga in 2010.”

29 Interview, male new candidate for Kabul Province.

30 Interview, male MP for Kabul Province.

31 Interview, male new candidate for Kabul Province.

32 Interview, male new candidate for Kabul Province.

suspensions of deals between Karzai and Abdullah were strengthened and a renewed scepticism of the opposition camp was visible. Since that time, Abdullah has been largely absent from parliamentary affairs and has not yet been able to assert himself as the unquestioned leader of the opposition, as the second quotation above indicates.

6.3 The meaning of “pro-government”?

Many respondents talked about the opposition in relation to the government, but very rarely was the pro-government position expanded or explained. As a new candidate for Kabul indicated in his interview, there is perceived dissent against the government within the cabinet itself:

*There are some people that belong to one party today but will belong to another party tomorrow. [One current minister] was against the Karzai government during his time in Germany but when he came to Afghanistan he became a minister. After one month as minister he talked to some members of the opposition and told them he wanted to form a party with them.*³³

This is compounded by the way in which the cabinet has been comprised of prominent but individual personalities, ostensibly representing the interests of different ethnic minorities in Afghanistan, without a unified ideological or party-based agenda. Indeed, it may be more accurate to name this group “pro-Karzai” as opposed to “pro-government,” although the two are often used synonymously. In general, the support of a person as opposed to a platform or agenda is commonplace in Afghan politics. Many campaign posters adorning billboards and walls around the country in the run-up to the election were demonstrating this visibly, depicting not only the candidates but also the key personalities with whom they wanted to show themselves allied. Examples include Wahdat party candidates with pictures of the deceased party leader Abdul Ali Mazari in the background; candidates from Panjshir depicted with an image of the local hero Ahmed Shah Masood behind them; and Uzbek candidates standing next to the Junbesh party leader, Abdul Rashid Dostum.

This contributes to the way in which the government/President Karzai is perceived as having to continually bargain for support and persuade undecided MPs with material reward.³⁴ In the same way as with the “opposition,” there is not a cohesive group that is reliably “pro-government” for every plenary vote. Indeed, if there had been, one would expect there to have been more support for both the electoral law and the Karzai candidates for ministerial nomination. The absence of such support led some MPs and political commentators to believe there was a conspiracy organised between Karzai and his supporters not to attend plenary, or to vote against the electoral law decree to achieve some other political purpose later on.³⁵ While it is not possible to substantiate these suspicions, it is clear that they shape the ways MPs view the government, and it is evident that there is no clear bloc in parliament that can be relied upon to consistently deliver a pro-government (or pro-Karzai) vote.

³³ Interview, male new candidate, Kabul Province.

³⁴ As indicated above, it is not only the government who are implicated in bribing MPs, but also opposition leaders.

³⁵ Conversations, international political commentator, Kabul; interviews with various MPs.

6.4 The shifting nature of parties

The shifting and un-established nature of parties in Afghanistan is both contributing toward and caused by the political instability fuelled by elections. This is particularly apparent in terms of people's reasons for joining and forming parties, as an MP from Nangarhar and a new candidate for Kabul explained:

Unfortunately we are always witness to the weakness of parties in the parliament...The leaders just think that they are the best, and that there is no deputy among them. We should be proud of being a member of a good party rather than trying to be the leader of a weak party. There are some candidates who say they are party candidates but they are acting independently because the parties do not have any policy for them to follow...Some people join parties just because of the personalities within it. Most of the people are joining our party because [Anwar-ul Haq] Ahadi [head of Afghan Millat and intended presidential candidate] is there. I really worry about this.³⁶

I started to establish a political party with the informal cooperation of Dr [Zalmay] Khalilzad, but I haven't registered the party yet. I have not chosen the strategy for the party but I will do when Dr Khalilzad returns from Dubai... We made a party to save our group because Mr Khalilzad didn't put himself forward for [the presidential] election in the end and we didn't want to lose our influence.³⁷

Clear from these statements is the role of key personalities in the formation and functioning of parties, one which has for decades contributed to the continual splintering of parties into smaller factions with different leaders.³⁸ Elections, however, exacerbate this problem given their tendency, under SNTV in particular, to focus on individuals as opposed to party groups, and to provide a very public platform for the self-promotion of these individuals. Indeed, it was rumoured in 2009 that many of the 41 candidates for the presidential election had no intention or hope of winning, but instead were campaigning to increase their familiarity with members of the public. In the second quotation above, the clear lack of party platform or strategy is demonstrated by the fact that the party was only established as a means to support a particular individual, and this person will take on the role of determining the party's aims and objectives only once he arrives in Afghanistan and after the party has been set up. Furthermore, the candidate interviewed explained that the reason for his candidacy in the Wolesi Jirga election was the instruction of Khalilzad.

The campaigns of parties and their candidates are also indicative of their shifting and ambiguous role in the political sphere. In 2005, most parties put forward candidates in the election, but often without stating their allegiance publically. This was due to the fact that there was no official space on the ballot to declare a party affiliation, and also due to the widespread perception that parties were considered responsible for the civil war in the 1990s and thus did not command popularity among the people. In 2010, again, most if not all parties were putting candidates forward in the election—this time some more publically than others. The 2010 official ballots provided space for party affiliation, which some

36 Interview, male MP for Nangarhar Province.

37 Interview, male new candidate for Kabul Province.

38 Ruttig, "Islamists, Leftists—and a Void in the Centre."

candidates were using. A number of party leaders now own their own television channels and have introduced their chosen new candidates to the public through television broadcast. A number of party candidates interviewed talked about being drafted or persuaded by their party to stand.³⁹

Candidates cannot always rely on a party's financial support, however, even if it has been promised by the most senior party members.⁴⁰ Given that this support is largely based on relationships and not on formal procedures, this is unsurprising. Indeed, according to one party candidate, the ability of parties to support their candidates has diminished significantly, due to structural deficiencies:

*Unfortunately there is a problem in Afghanistan in that we don't have established procedures...In the coming election the political parties' role has become weak. Last time in the election no one could be elected as an independent candidate without party support, but now the opposite is true, and there are no programmes within parties to support candidates.*⁴¹

In spite of the fact that the party represented by this candidate is not insignificant in size or influence among a particular ethnic group, he was nonetheless concerned about the lack of procedure through which candidates are supported—a concern which he linked in his interview both to the problematic nature of the electoral system itself and to the weakness of the party structure. One example of this weakness has been, in general, parties' (and other groups') inability to significantly reduce the number of candidates they put forward in elections so as not to split the votes between them. Whereas a strategic electoral campaign would, under SNTV, support only one candidate per “constituency” (whether this is a province or smaller geographical area or people group), parties still struggle to do this.⁴² As the same candidate explained:

*For the coming election our party has a lot of candidates. We want to decrease the number so that we don't lose our votes...The parties should have strategies. For example from one province we have three candidates when really we should just have one. We are trying to come to a good conclusion.*⁴³

While stories from respondents of efforts to do this were frequent in interviews with both incumbents and new candidates, discussions were still very much ongoing. As with the provincial council election in 2009, final decisions about who should (and more importantly, who should not) stand for a given group or party were being taken at the last minute, when official ballots could not be altered.⁴⁴ This being the case, the final decisions made by parties on who to put forward are often jeopardised by the fact that the candidates they reject still appear as registered candidates on the electoral ballots.

³⁹ Interviews, various party-affiliated MPs.

⁴⁰ Interview, male party candidate for Kabul Province.

⁴¹ Interview, male party candidate for Kabul Province.

⁴² Afghanistan's Single Non-Transferable Vote System (SNTV) dictates unlimited multi-member constituencies in which any number of candidates can put themselves forward, running the risk of splitting the public vote between candidates, none of whom can then score highly enough to win.

⁴³ Interview, male party candidate for Kabul Province.

⁴⁴ Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, “Voting Together: Why Afghanistan's 2009 Elections were (and were not) a Disaster” (Kabul: AREU, 2009) 8.

6.5 A level of reliability lacking

Clearly lacking on the part of key individuals, both in the “pro-government” and “opposition” camps, is a reliable political stance. This is destabilising in a number of ways, as it means that MPs and candidates cannot be sure of their bases of support or political connections. One MP for Kabul who will not be standing for re-election addressed this issue in connection with her plan to form a “real” opposition from outside the parliament, while in the meantime supporting a select number of MPs to push their agenda from within:

*We are about 40-45 people and we want to make a strong opposition, but we are afraid of President Karzai, that he might interfere in this group because he is an expert at manipulating people and knows very well how to buy and sell party members. I do not want to join an unsteady opposition—instead I am trying to find a real opposition.*⁴⁵

This respondent appears to be expecting a “real” opposition to make itself apparent and does not communicate the need to take any responsibility on her part to help consolidate such a bloc. However, the stated desire to form a group that is sincere and cohesive is representative of a number of MPs’ concerns, and is also reflected in the personalities that attract the most support among the wider public in Afghanistan. For example, Ramazan Bashardost, an MP known for his reformist and at times extreme stance, has not changed his political positions since he was elected to parliament in 2005, when he took the third highest vote-count in Kabul Province, behind only Yunus Qanooni and Mohammad Mohaqqueq.⁴⁶ Gaining over 10 percent of the presidential vote in 2009,⁴⁷ with support in a wide range of provinces and across different ethnicities, he clearly demonstrated an appeal that is arguably based to some extent on his steadfast policy of non-alignment and his populist approach to politics. Although some have said that Bashardost is “crazy,” due to his extreme platforms for reform (such as the re-staffing of the entire United Nations operation in Afghanistan) and atypical personal behaviour (his unmarried status at middle age and his determination to live and dress as simply as possible, with apparently very little personal expenditure), he has nevertheless generated widespread support from people who see him as reliable—as someone who has not changed his political stance in the last ten years and has essentially remained unaligned with any other political actors.

With the exception of certain individuals, however, the tendency among MPs is to maintain a middle ground between movements in order to benefit simultaneously from both sides, and to be able change sides easily if it becomes politically expedient. This is destructive in that it affects downward accountability to constituents, who can never be certain of their MPs’ allegiances or ties. Political parties are problematic in Afghanistan for a number of reasons, not least that they carry a legacy of civil war and embody a general concern with competition between groups as opposed to consensus.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, reliable blocs

45 Interview, female MP for Kabul.

46 Bashardost received 30,794 votes in the parliamentary election for Kabul Province in 2005, behind Mohaqqueq (52,686) and Qanooni (31,225). The next candidate after Bashardost, in fourth place, gained 9,934 votes. Joint Electoral Management Body statistics, 2005.

47 Independent Election Commission, <http://www.iec.org.af/results/leadingCandidate.html>, (accessed June 2010).

48 For more on this, see Anna Larson, “Toward an Afghan Democracy? Exploring Perceptions of Democratisation in Afghanistan” (Kabul: AREU, 2009).

in parliament would encourage transparency both within the Wolesi Jirga and in outside relationships with constituents. The question remains, then: What would be the necessary incentives to encourage the consolidation of political parties and/or movements, and the increased reliability of political positions? Evidently, many factors relating to the Afghan context figure into the answer; these include security, the belief that a losing side would not be persecuted in any way following elections, an impartial election/election commission, an impartial civil service and a strong parliamentary system over which the executive had less influence. Common among these factors, however, is their inability to be established in the short term, primarily due to the underlying need for trust in the system.

6.6 Narratives of fraud in 2010

The Wolesi Jirga election in 2010 and its contribution to increasing instability cannot be considered outside of the context in which it was taking place, particularly in terms of its chronological context following the fraudulent polls in 2009. Calling into question the whole exercise of conducting elections in Afghanistan, the 2009 presidential and provincial council elections would prove to be a landmark in international assistance provision to the country. Extensive media coverage of fraud, followed by a cancelled run-off (which to many Afghans signified international intervention in the outcome) served to consolidate international doubts about the viability of democratisation processes in the context of continuing conflict. For Afghans interviewed for an AREU study at the time, manipulated results—over and above concerns with ballot stuffing and vote buying, for example—served to delegitimise provincial council election results.⁴⁹ In spite of results being recorded and published immediately at the polling stations, official (and often entirely different) results followed some weeks later, as one new candidate recalled:

Most of the fraud took place in Kabul itself. We had a female candidate for our party [for the provincial council election] who told us after the elections that she had been successful initially, but that the candidate who was ahead of her in the official results had had her vote-count increased.

This statement is largely contrary to the reports of fraud that were abundant following the 2009 elections, which stated that the main centres of fraudulent activity had been in the most insecure provinces where it was not possible to send observers. Of course, there is significant evidence to substantiate the claims of fraud in these areas.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, this narrative of fraud at the periphery was undeniably convenient for those who were successful in the elections, as they could assign blame for the fraud on outlying provinces and illiterate masses who supposedly didn't know any better. For fraud to have occurred in Kabul—indeed, at the hands of the Independent Election Commission (IEC), changing the initial results to reflect different winners in the official statistics later on—is a different story: first, because it implicates key leaders among the educated elite; and, second, because it is much easier to address if the necessary political will is harnessed.

⁴⁹ Coburn and Larson, "Voting Together," 12.

⁵⁰ See, for example, National Democratic Institute, 2009 "Afghanistan Election Data," http://afghanistanelectiondata.org/#filter/600-95-AND/country?views-mode=views-mode-map#layers=district_map_openlayers_7,district_map_openlayers_8,afghanistan-ethnic&baseLayers=afghanistan-grey (accessed January 2010).

Disappointingly, the political will of international actors to demand electoral reform after the 2009 polls soon dissipated and was not substantiated by concrete action to instigate change.⁵¹ Several amendments to the electoral law were made in early 2010 by presidential decree, amid considerable controversy; these changes included questionable measures, such as the removal of a mandatory international presence on the Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) and the general consolidation of executive control over the process of elections.⁵² After much debate and a strong reaction from MPs to the President's proposed amendments, certain compromises were made, with IEC top officials resigning from office (to be replaced by new presidential appointments). Following significant bargaining with key international players, further minor amendments were made before the issue was dropped. As a result, crucial reforms were still necessary, and lacking, for the 2010 election.

As mentioned previously, however, very few MPs seem to have considered this an issue worth fighting for at length, and most prepared to re-contest their seats regardless. The second of two candidates for Kabul not running again this year, cited the electoral law changes as her reason:

*...[W]hen the electoral law was being discussed in parliament, I voted against it, because the necessary amendments were not made. How could I put myself forward under an electoral law that I myself cannot accept? I did not run for re-election because I do not accept the electoral law.*⁵³

This MP, however, was one of the few respondents in this study to mention the law, in spite of research being conducted both before and after the issue was raised in parliament. Concerns about being able to register as a candidate appear to have superseded, for many, the issue of whether the election would take place in a truly competitive environment.

Furthermore, very little initiative was being taken on the part of MPs or new candidates to try to curb electoral fraud. Indeed, when discussing the issue, most respondents interviewed looked to the IEC as the body with the principal responsibility for this task:

*The IEC proposed that we should send out observers [on election day] but we don't have the ability to do this. It would be better if there was an organisation that could work to improve the election. We have asked the IEC to prohibit fraud, and they said they would provide 300 independent observers.*⁵⁴

This passive concern is indicative of a number of issues. Essentially, it demonstrates that MPs and candidates—even if they did have some incentive to prevent fraud occurring on a large scale—feel powerless to act, to stop or successfully report fraudulent activity; that if they did report it, they would not expect anything to come of it; that they do not perceive

51 Electoral reform was barely mentioned in the communiqué from the London Conference in January 2010, for example, which was a critical opportunity to hold the Afghan government to account. See “Lasting Peace Requires Accountable Political Institutions: An AREU statement on the importance of elections following the London Conference on Afghanistan,” (Kabul: AREU, 2010). This oversight has been rectified since, however, in the statement of need for electoral reform following the 2010 election, in the communiqué for the Kabul Conference held in July 2010.

52 Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, “Electoral Law Working Translation: 2005 Electoral Law and Article 79 Decree Proposal, and Article 79 Final Decree on Electoral Law: February 2010” (Democracy International).

53 Interview, female MP for Kabul Province.

54 Interview, female MP for Balkh Province.

countering fraud as their responsibility anyway; and, finally, that the narrative of fraud is a convenient excuse for not winning, should they be unsuccessful in the polls.⁵⁵ These factors in part explain why candidates for the 2010 election were vocalising concerns about fraud, but simultaneously taking few active measures to prevent its occurrence.

6.7 Narratives of security in 2010

Inherently linked to narratives of fraud are those of insecurity. Like fraud, insecurity compounds the way in which the rules of the game are shaped by the strongest players—those candidates able to mitigate security risks by paying for private militias, for example. For many less influential MPs, however, insecurity has genuinely curtailed their ability to visit constituents and has added a significant and in some cases fatal risk factor to their daily movements and activities. Furthermore, MPs representing the most insecure provinces are now faced with the dual problem of being unable to campaign effectively, while also being unable to ensure security for constituents wanting to vote in elections. These concerns were brought to the new Minister of Interior, the head of the National Directorate for Security and IEC officials in a plenary session in June 2010; and although provision of security for over 6,000 polling stations was promised, many MPs left dissatisfied with the official effort to improve security for the election.⁵⁶

Evidently, security was also a problem in a number of areas in 2005; in 2010, regions previously considered “secure” deteriorated to the extent that campaigning has taken on a life-threatening characteristic. This cannot be taken to mean that armed opposition groups (AOGs) were planning to boycott the election entirely. However, as one local *shura* member in Balkh Province explained:

*The Taliban and Hezb-i-Islami make people vote for the candidates connected with them and supported by them. For instance, they tell the head of one school to make their students vote for specific candidates otherwise their fingers will be cut off. They threaten people to make sure they do not vote for candidates who are against them. In this way, the candidates who are connected with the Taliban and Hezb-i-Islami or the government can win the election. But in the areas where the Taliban and Hezb-i-Islami don't have influence, they threaten people not to participate in the election otherwise their fingers will be cut off or they will be killed.*⁵⁷

According to this respondent, the ability and desire of AOGs to prevent voters going to the polls depends on their style and degree of influence in a given area. Even if they do allow participation, there is the perception that they will threaten voters to vote in a particular way. Also of note here is the inclusion of “government” candidates in the same category as those standing for the Taliban or Hezb-i-Islami—evidently the use of force and voter manipulation is not perceived as limited to AOGs alone. It is interesting that the respondent considered the Taliban and Hezb-i-Islami to be within the same category, as the latter does in fact have a “legitimate,” legally accepted branch, functioning and officially represented in parliament. Perhaps the most concerning aspect of this statement, however,

55 Hassan Wafaey and Larson, “Wolesi Jirga in 2010,” 14.

56 United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, “Transcript of Wolesi Jirga Plenary Session, Wednesday 16 June 2010” (unpublished).

57 Interview, male local *shura* member, Balkh Province.

is the certainty with which the respondent spoke. When asked later in the interview how the Taliban, Hezb-i-Islami or government would know whether or not people had voted for their candidates, the response was straightforward:

*For example, the polling centres and numbers of ballot boxes are known [to AOGs] and when the votes are counted at the polling centre, it is shown who voted for whom, and whether the teacher really did make the students vote for the candidate or not.*⁵⁸

In this way, counting and releasing votes at the polling station—a policy change since 2005, when votes were centrally collected before being counted and released to the public—threatens to promote this kind of voter manipulation and terrorising on a wide scale, publicising as it does the specific location of votes and allowing the potential identification of voter communities.⁵⁹ On the other hand, counting at the central level is widely considered among both the MPs and constituents interviewed to increase the risk of ballot box manipulation in the time it takes to transport the boxes to the centre. Without stronger guarantees protecting both the validity of votes and the safety of voters, elections will continue to fuel instability, as they will emphasise the needs of candidates to choose increasingly unsavoury measures to ensure a seat at the table.

58 Interview, male local *shura* member, Balkh Province

59 Coburn and Larson, “Voting Together,” 11.

7. Conclusion and Implications

This research shows that in the current climate in Afghanistan, and in their current manifestation, elections have the potential to destabilise. They exacerbate the race for political capital in a context in which this capital is difficult to secure, and in doing so increase the incentives for candidates to employ increasingly illicit, expensive or elaborate tactics to gain voter support.

The way in which the legislative-executive relationship has changed over recent years—and since 2009 in particular—demonstrates a key effect of the instability of the context at present. While on the surface this shift has been toward increasing opposition to the government in parliament and a growing animosity, in reality it has also involved the general strengthening of legislative-executive connections during parliament's first term—through business deals, nepotism and, more recently, campaign support.

Having said this, political connections and allegiances in Afghanistan are notoriously ephemeral and subject to a considerable instability. As such, any connections that are built between MPs and members of the executive, for example, are not necessarily reliable or long-lasting. What does this ubiquitous uncertainty mean, then, for the *Wolesi Jirga* in the future? Essentially that the allegiances in parliament, which have shifted continually throughout the last five years, increasingly in the run-up to both presidential and parliamentary elections, will continue to do so post-2010. In the post-election period, once the stakes are lower, it is likely that the environment inside the *Wolesi Jirga* will stabilise somewhat. Nevertheless, there will likely remain a tendency toward non-committal alliances in which there are few linkages—other than ethnicity, perhaps—binding MPs to a particular group for any length of time.

Stability, in its most basic definition, requires that its subject is not likely to change in the short term. Yet elections have the opposite effect, promoting shifts, unreliable allegiances and uncertainty. When democratic processes are institutionalised and accepted by all players, this uncertainty of outcome is a positive force promoting downward accountability and checks on power structures. In Afghanistan at present, however, given the relative newness of these institutions and the propensity for fraudulent activity, due to the high stakes involved and the zero-sum game of political competition, elections exacerbate a race for political capital which is increasingly difficult to obtain, and which some MPs will resort to illicit measures to secure. This renders the playing field uneven, with some MPs having greater access to these illegal resources than others; and thus, the uncertainty of outcome that elections should encourage is not uncertain enough to voters who see the manipulation of the system by those with the means to do so. Strong players—including the Karzai administration—are too easily able to reshape the rules of the game to their own advantage.

This does not support the commonly cited argument that Afghanistan is not ready for democracy: other AREU studies have demonstrated a clear desire among Afghans from many backgrounds for substantive democratic institutions—such as rule of law, freedom of speech and competitive elections—to be established in the country. There is a great deal of support for the idea of elections and public participation in selecting government among Afghans. Furthermore, to say that the country is not “ready” implies a linear progression from “unreadiness” to “readiness,” as well as a necessary set of preconditions. Other authors

have shown that these preconditions do not exist in other contexts.⁶⁰ Having said this, there is a certain danger in promoting the institutionalisation of a form of competition that is not competitive, and which increases the power bases of those who can shape the rules of the game to their own liking. This is the result of hastily imposed political institutions, such as elections in a post-conflict environment, which were not substantively supported by large-scale civic education and institution-building in between polls.

Elections should be promoted in Afghanistan: in the long term, they present the prospect of a stable political system in which change is always possible. But they need to be promoted carefully, with attention paid to solidifying the rules of the game, lessening executive control, increasing security and enforcing punitive measures for those who refuse to comply. At present, all indicators point in the opposite direction, with national and international actors at the highest levels unwilling to exert the pressure needed to achieve these goals. If nothing is done to change this trajectory, elections will continue to promote the instability they are fuelling now.

60 Charles Tilly, *Democracy* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

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