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Local Afghan Power Structures and the International Military Intervention

A review of developments in Badakhshan and Kunduz provinces

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the beginning of the 2001 intervention in Afghanistan, the contributing nations to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) have declared that their aim is to 'assist the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to extend its authority' over the whole territory of Afghanistan. This report attempts to answer whether and to what extent ISAF forces have been successful in accomplishing their task in the two northeastern provinces of Kunduz and Badakhshan. To answer the question, this report maps the power distribution and the constellations between the most-significant political actors of both provinces and relates them to actions of the central government and the international actors working in Afghanistan. In unprecedented detail, this study takes the first step toward assessing ISAF's effects and uncovers developments on the grassroots level that have been largely unnoticed. It hopes to encourage further research on other regions and thereby kick-start a more-comprehensive lessons-learned process that goes beyond mere technicalities and acknowledges the social realities of power and rule in Afghanistan.

The power structures of Kunduz and, to a lesser extent, Badakhshan had already fragmented before the intervention in 2001. In contrast to Badakhshan, the distribution of power among Kunduz' commanders of armed groups changed considerably because of the fall of the Taleban. Affiliates of Jamiat-e Islami-ye Afghanistan (Islamic Society of Afghanistan) became slightly superior to those of other politico-military parties. Mainly Pashtuns, but also members of other ethnicities without affiliation to the groups in power, were marginalised. In Badakhshan, Jamiat affiliates clearly dominated but were split between supporters of former President Burhanuddin Rabbani and the party's Shura-ye Nazar-e Shomal (Supervisory Council of the North) faction. Since the mid-2000s in Kunduz and since the late 2000s to a much lower degree in Badakhshan, the Taleban received major support from those parts of the population excluded from the provincial patronage networks. In Kunduz, they were therefore able to severely challenge existing power brokers in some districts at the end of the decade.

The government of Hamed Karzai has never been united. It has always consisted of several factions with patronage ties to the local level that compete for influence. To exert control over the provinces, President

Karzai shifted positions to proxies in a 'divide and rule' manner or tried to create counterweights against opposing factions. Karzai's main competitors in Kunduz and Badakhshan were power brokers affiliated to the Jamiat party and especially its Shura-ye Nazar faction. In both provinces, he therefore cooperated with actors of the second-most-important groups: the Hezb-e Islami-ye Afghanistan (Islamic Party of Afghanistan), sometimes Rabbani's Jamiat faction and strongmen of the Ittehad-e Islami bara-ye Azadi-ye Afghanistan (Islamic Union for the Liberation of Afghanistan), later renamed Tanzim-e Dawat-e Islami-ye Afghanistan (Organisation for the Islamic Call of Afghanistan).

Since 2004, Germany has led both provincial reconstruction teams (PRT) in Kunduz and Badakhshan and therefore provided most forces in these areas. In contrast to representatives of other nations, the Germans attempted only in a few instances to actively influence the major power structure. Once they tried to replace provincial chiefs of police in the context of police pay and rank reform (PRR). However, they did not intentionally target the power structures as such, but aimed at illegal and unprofessional behaviour of police officials in general. Generally, they kept to the legalistic principle of cooperating with official power holders and otherwise tried to stay neutral. But in some cases, they also worked with the strongest unofficial actors to prevent conflicts and trouble for the PRTs. In 2009, the Americans significantly reinforced their troops in Kunduz because the insurgency in the northeast had grown tremendously. They focussed on fighting the Taliban and their allies. To this end, they supported militias who belonged to local power brokers. A lack of strategy, related to the different interests involved, hampered all of ISAF's efforts, including those to actively influence the local power structure.

Comparable to the civil-war period, power brokers in Kunduz and Badakhshan constantly tried to balance each other's power assets by forming alliances or gaining similar advantages. The international military presence, however, changed the rules of the power games, preventing open large-scale violence, common from the 1990s until the early years of the intervention. Afghan power brokers were therefore forced to achieve their aims without openly using mass violence – though they still applied it in a covert and limited way – and to transform their military power into a formalised and non-violent form. Also, the international community's Afghanistan project created incentives to refrain from large-scale violence and instead peacefully compete for the rents accessible in different forms from foreign donors. Many local commanders therefore directly or indirectly profited from international projects.

Local power structures in Badakhshan and Kunduz fluctuated but as a whole remained largely unchanged over the course of the intervention. This is confirmed by a detailed analysis of the distribution of major provincial and district positions. Though some actors were more successful in transforming their civil-war role into one suitable for the Karzai period, and a new class of educated intermediaries emerged, the differences were not decisive overall. This was especially true after the build-up of pro-government militias in the late 2000s again strengthened the major commanders. Furthermore, Karzai's efforts did not enable him to rule both provinces. However, he did succeed in denying his Jamiat competitors unchallenged domination over both areas.

The approach of the mainly German PRT forces – to focus on the official as well as, in some cases, the most powerful strongmen – cemented the existing power distribution. In addition, though the underprivileged segments of the population in both provinces initially greeted German efforts to prevent 'collateral damage', because they cooperated with government officials, locals saw them as accomplices of the ruling class. The Americans' counterinsurgency approach had the same effects since to fight the insurgents they allied with established power brokers and finally helped them to fight back attempts to challenge the latter's rule. Any changes of the local power structure the internationals attempted only worked in cooperation with local allies. The results of this study show that the post-2001 international intervention did not significantly change the power structure of Kunduz and Badakhshan province. Rather, it affected how the actors dealt with each other and strengthened some pre-2002 trends. Mostly, however, the local power brokers, who were mostly (former) commanders, determined the result of the power struggles.

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