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Governance in Afghanistan in a Regional Perspective

This is a paper in the AAN Discussion Paper Series. The series aims to provide a platform for a wide variety of views and contributions on developments in and around Afghanistan, with the objective of further informing and encouraging debate.

In the discussion about governance and reforms in Afghanistan, the regional dimension – and Afghanistan's position in comparison with its neighbouring countries – is often neglected. Dr. Christian Wagner, head of the Asia Research group at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (Berlin), discusses parameters to measure this relationship.

INTRODUCTION

The extensive political, military and economic engagement of the international community in Afghanistan raises the question about what kind of governance can be achieved there in the long-term. The Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) began with the assumption that internal stability can be achieved with democratic and free-market development. And yet, an examination of Afghanistan's neighbours in South Asia reveals that democratic and free-market mechanisms actually often inflame conflicts in ethnically-fragmented societies with a low level of development.¹ Under such conditions, good and effective governance as well as stability will be difficult to realise.

¹ South Asia consists of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. All countries are members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). Afghanistan joined SAARC as recently as 2007.

The comparison of Afghanistan with neighbouring countries characterised by similar circumstances leads to the more realistic assumption that forms of poor governance will prevail in Afghanistan for the longer term. However, this situation may still be perceived as an improvement upon the present state of civil war in many parts of the country.

1. DEMOCRACY AND MINORITY CONFLICTS IN SOUTH ASIA

The demands of ethnic, linguistic, religious, and tribal groups for greater political, economic and cultural participation is the main challenge for countries like Afghanistan and its neighbours. Internationally, the political map of South Asia has been shaped by such disputes, whether the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 or the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. Domestic developments in India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri

Lanka have also been determined by these kinds of conflicts. This is also the case in Afghanistan where disputes between ethnic groups shaped political developments even before the Soviet invasion in 1979. Currently, one of Afghanistan's central challenges is to find a balance in representation between the Pashtun majority and the various ethnic minority groups in the state's institutions.

South Asian governments have adopted different strategies to address the challenge of ethnic conflicts. Indian governments, for example, have developed a broad range of institutional mechanisms in order to undertake the task of state- and nation-building. The process of reorganisation of states that began in the 1950s, the Three-Language Compromise of the 1960s, legal privileges for religious minorities like Muslims and Sikhs, and the inclusion of lower castes and tribal groups in a complex system of quotas and reservations have all contributed to the remarkable stability of India's democratic institutions.

However, one should not overlook the fact that democratic institutions alone have not been able to establish a political balance between ethnic groups in other countries. In Sri Lanka, democratic competition and the veto power of Buddhist-nationalist groups acted to block political compromise between the Sinhalese majority and the Tamil minority, with their demands for greater regional autonomy.

The comparison of the democratic regimes of India and Sri Lanka discloses the importance of socio-

structural factors such as the size of social groupings that can be mobilized along various religious, linguistic or ethnic lines in democratic competition. In spite of a population of 80 percent Hindus, India is politically a society of minorities in which no group could ever claim to represent the majority. The fragmented social structure of India with the variety of overlapping ethnic, religious, caste and other forms of identity explains among other things the success, i.e. the stability of her democratic institutions. In Sri Lanka, however, the minority Tamils, representing 12 percent of the population, had no chance of overcoming the dominance of the Sinhalese majority via political competition.

2. POVERTY AND DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH ASIA

Despite more than 60 years of economic development, poverty in South Asia still remains widespread. Economic 'miracles' and the emergence of new middle-classes notwithstanding, India and Pakistan will most probably not reach the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) in 2015. The same status can be assumed of Afghanistan. It is noteworthy that socioeconomic figures do not show a substantial difference between democratic states such as India and authoritarian regimes like Pakistan and Bangladesh in their capacity to reduce poverty. Democracy and development, therefore, do not automatically go hand-in-hand.

Table: Poverty in South Asia

	Share of the Population below...			Literacy Rate (1995-2005, > 15 years)	HDI Rank 2007
	National Poverty Level (1990- 2004)	1 US-\$/Day (1990-2005)	2 US-\$/Day (1990-2005)		
Bangladesh	49,8 %	41,3%	84,0%	47,5%	140
India	28,6%	34,3%	80,4%	61,0%	128
Nepal	30,9%	24,1%	68,5%	48,6%	142
Pakistan	32,6%	17,0%	73,6%	49,9%	136
Sri Lanka	25,0%	5,6%	41,6%	90,7%	99
Afghanistan	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	28,0%	n.s.

n.s.: not specified; HDI: Human Development Index

Source: World Bank, World Development Report 2006; UNDP, Human Development Report 2007/08

In the Human Development Index (HDI) 2007/2008, all South Asian countries, including India in spite of its spectacular economic growth rates, were ranked lower than in the preceding year. This situation indicates the massive structural

constraints on the redistribution of economic growth and development success in democratic as well as authoritarian states in the region. Most important causal factors are failures in land reforms and decades of neglect of primary education and health care.

3. GOVERNANCE IN SOUTH ASIA

It is therefore not surprising that the World Bank's governance indicators are unsatisfactory for South Asian countries.

Table: Governance Indicators for South Asia

Governance Indicators	Year	India	Bangladesh	Sri Lanka	Nepal	Pakistan	Afghanistan
Voice and Accountability	2008	58,6	30,7	33,6	25,0	19,2	11,0
	2002	59,1	35,6	44,2	22,6	14,4	7,2
	1998	58,2	43,3	47,6	44,2	27,4	1,0
Political Stability	2008	16,7	9,5	2,8	7,6	1,4	0,9
	2002	17,8	20,7	19,2	6,7	9,1	3,4
	1998	21,2	26,9	10,6	23,6	12,0	0,5
Government Effectiveness	2008	53,5	22,7	46,9	24,1	25,5	8,5
	2002	55,5	27,5	57,8	36,5	30,3	2,8
	1998	53,1	28,9	46,9	37,4	26,5	0,0
Regulatory Quality	2008	46,8	20,7	44,4	26,5	34,7	3,8
	2002	41,5	17,6	60,5	30,7	20,0	2,4
	1998	34,6	25,9	56,6	24,4	26,3	4,9
Rule of Law	2008	56,4	27,2	54,5	24,8	19,1	0,4
	2002	53,3	25,7	56,7	41,0	27,1	1,9
	1998	58,1	21,0	53,8	52,4	21,9	2,4
Control of Corruption	2008	44,4	10,6	54,1	28,9	24,6	1,4
	2002	42,2	13,1	51,5	46,1	24,8	0,5
	1998	47,6	26,7	53,4	43,2	18,4	0,0

Percentile Rank: 0-100 (Ranging from 0, indicating the lowest degree of governance, to 100, indicating the highest degree of governance).

Source: <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.asp> (03.11.2009).

The indicator for participation (*voice / accountability*) encompasses the chances of the population to participate in the political process, i.e. in the scope of elections, freedom of assembly, of press and of opinion. The indicator for stability (*political stability*) gauges the perception as to whether the government can be destabilized or overthrown. Effectiveness (*government effectiveness*) measures public services and their independence from political control. *Regulatory quality* indicates possibilities for a government to formulate and implement policies for the development of private industry. Trust in laws and public organs, such as the police and courts, is measured by the indicator *rule of law*. And lastly, *control of corruption* evaluates the extent to which public resources are used for private purposes and whether public institutions are misused for the private interests of elites.

If Afghanistan is understood as a multi-ethnic society with severe problems of security and under-development, the regional comparison draws a sobering picture of the country's long-term governance prospects. On the one hand, the above figures demonstrate some notable successes between 1998 and 2006. Improvements in the fields of participation and government effectiveness are striking and largely attributable to the 2004/5 elections. This gain is predicted to fall again, however, following the flawed 2009 presidential and provincial council elections. On the other hand, in the same period, regulatory quality and rule of law deteriorated.

Comparison with the figures of neighbouring South Asian countries highlights the enormous challenges confronting the Afghan government and the international community in state- and nation-building. Political stability in Afghanistan would

need to triple (from 1.4 to 4.8) to reach at least the level achieved in Pakistan, itself unfortunately not regarded as a model of political stability. In the fields of government effectiveness (Pakistan: 34.1; Afghanistan: 5.7), rule of law (Pakistan: 24.3; Afghanistan: 0.5) and control of corruption (Pakistan: 18.0; Afghanistan: 1.9), inter-country differences are even more striking. Afghanistan is still far removed from Pakistan's modest levels of governance which took more than sixty years to achieve. Disparities with India are even more profound. In the field of rule of law, India has reached a level of governance 100 times higher than in Afghanistan at the present time. And yet, even in India, the rule of law faces many obstacles. The Supreme Court has a high reputation and its judicial activism has initiated controversial debate about its role in India's democracy. However, in the lower courts, the high number of pending cases makes it nearly impossible for common citizens to obtain a trial in accordance with the rule of law. Moreover, the police, the most important institution for implementing the rule of law, are considered to be chronically corrupt and have the most negative reputation of all public institutions.

4. GOVERNANCE PERSPECTIVES IN AFGHANISTAN

The social and economic modernization of multi-ethnic societies such as Afghanistan and its neighbours within a democratic framework entails a long and complex process. With group interests dominating the political process, all development achievements are interpreted in the light of often

competing ethnic, linguistic, religious and/or tribal affiliations and interests. At the same time, democratic competition itself encourages the formation of group identities. There are many examples from South Asia, that the distribution of development resources has been interpreted as a "zero sum game" between societal groups, i.e. that the socio-economic development of one group was perceived to be to the detriment of another group. The low level of governance in most South Asian countries indirectly reflects the impact of those conflicts emerging when certain groups feel discriminated against in the process of state- and nation-building.

Afghanistan will inevitably face similar challenges to those confronting its neighbours in the region, in its own particular case, the need to realise a balance between the aspirations of the Pashtun majority and the various ethnic minorities within the framework of institutional mechanisms. Therefore, learning from the experiences of other South Asian countries may be a good strategy for Afghanistan where issues like decentralisation, language policy and ethnic representation dominate the domestic debate. The international community will not be in a position to influence or control this process, given the risk of being increasingly perceived as part of the problem rather than as part of the solution. Consequently, in addition to economic and development cooperation with the elected Afghan government, the international community should focus on its own security interests in order to prevent the scenario in which international terrorist groups are able to once again use Afghan territory for their operations.

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The Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN) is a non-profit, independent policy research organisation. It aims to bring together the knowledge and experience of a large number of experts to inform policy and increase the understanding of Afghan realities.

The institutional structure of AAN includes a core team (currently consisting of three senior analysts) and a network of regular contributors with expertise in the fields of Afghan politics, governance, rule of law and security. AAN will publish regular in-depth thematic reports, policy briefings and comments.

The main channel for dissemination of the reports is the AAN web site. For further information, please visit www.aan-afghanistan.org.

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