

The Democratic Prospects of Afghanistan

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“One man. One vote. One time.” It is a scenario that perplexes proponents of democracy: A candidate wins a democratic election and the legitimacy it entails. During his term in office, he expands the power of the executive and abolishes term limits from the constitution. He is able to accomplish this with the support of a legislature that, for one reason or another, acquiesces to his demands. In effect, they transformed a democracy into a dictatorship. The process has played out in slow motion from South America to Africa to Asia. The result is something that Fareed Zakaria labels illiberal democracy. The connection between democracy and liberalism is misunderstood; especially in America where “liberal” has taken on different connotations. Once the relationship is understood, most Americans would agree that liberal values are more desirable than democracy by itself. A regime like that of the Taliban’s could easily gain power through democratic means. In fact, it did to a certain extent in the 1990’s. If an oppressive government were democratically elected, it would be deemed a failure. The desired end state in Afghanistan is a *liberal* democracy. In order to achieve this, certain conditions must be in place to ensure that a hard earned democracy does not deteriorate into tyranny.

As a fledgling democracy in a region of the world that has never been friendly to neither liberalism nor democracy, Afghanistan faces many challenges. Of course there is the sizable fundamentalist element that poses a threat. Arab countries often use the presence of such groups as justification for heavy-handed policies and illiberal violations of human rights. The Afghan economy is largely undeveloped and heavily relies upon natural resources. Afghanistan’s tribal society is resistant to centralized government and perpetuates corruption. Poverty and illiteracy are the status quo. All of these issues must be rectified before a democratic government is established.

Major Jim Gant wrote an article, "One Tribe at a Time," in which he argues in favor of tribal engagement as a counterinsurgency strategy. Tribal engagement has raised a lot of debate regarding its effectiveness as such. What those arguments fail to mention are the broader implications of tribal engagement on the stability of democracy. The argument of this paper is that tribal engagement is a strategy that not only defeats insurgents, but also contributes to nation building and establishing a stable democracy.

Government is a reflection of society. By focusing solely on the capacity and legitimacy of the central government of Afghanistan, the United States and its allies are following a dangerous precedent of placing the state before society. The first historical example of this was the Jacobin regime during the French Revolution. This period is also known as the Reign of Terror. The democratically sanctioned atrocities were made possible because the concept of limited government had not yet been developed in France. As a result, it became a textbook example of democracy gone awry. A democratic government must be limited and contain checks and balances lest the government become totalitarian. A strong civil society must exist if a limited government is to be feasible. Otherwise, the population will be dependent on politicians for subsidies, regulations and tariffs for economic security (Zakaria 64-65).

Democracy is by no means a starting point. It is the culmination of certain conditions – one of which is a thriving civil society. In *Making Democracy Work*, Robert Putnam uses a case study of Italy to illustrate the importance of civil society for an efficient government. He writes, "Civil associations contribute to the effectiveness and stability of democratic government, it is argued, both because of the "internal" effects on individual members and because of their "external" effects on the wider polity,". Internally, civic associations develop a sense of cooperation, unity and "public spiritedness". The external effects amount to what Putnam

describes as interest articulation. Putnam quotes Alexis de Toqueville, who explains interest articulation in his exposé of American civil society: “When some view is represented by an association, it must take clearer and more precise shape...An association unites the energies of divergent minds and vigorously directs them toward a clearly indicated goal,” (Putnam 89-90). The many tribes of Afghanistan provide a foundation for civil society that is almost too good to be true. Tribal society is organic to Afghanistan. Furthermore, Afghan tribes – especially Pashtuns – operate largely according to democratic principles. Major Gant argues that tribal engagement empowers Afghan tribes so that they can provide security for themselves. Empowerment need not stop there. In fact, it should include political empowerment so that those tribes, the traditional societal structure of Afghanistan, can develop into that country’s civil society.

Reduced corruption would be one benefit of this expanded approach to tribal engagement. In his case study, Robert Putnam found that regions with a poorly developed civil society are prone to “clientelistic” politics. Clientelistic politics are characterized by “vertical relations and dependency” where citizens ask politicians for personal favors. It is nothing more than a diplomatic way of saying corruption. Clientelistic politics (or corruption) in the least civic areas focus on the needs of an individual client rather than the needs of the whole constituency. The Argentina of Juan Perón is an excellent example of clientelistic politics. On the other hand, areas where civil society is more fully developed display “programmatic” politics. This is the kind of government to which most Americans are accustomed. In these societies, citizens contact politicians regarding policy and legislation, not personal favors. Putnam’s study shows that there is a negative correlation of .71 between the degree of civil society and clientelistic politics (Putnam 99-101). In addition to teaching Afghan tribes how to provide the basic needs for

themselves, proponents of tribal engagement should also focus on cultivating a strong, civic relation between the villagers and the central government. Tribal engagement will not undermine the central government like opponents of this strategy argue. Tribal engagement, if done in such a way to develop Afghan civil society, will result in Afghan villagers demanding legitimacy, not undermining it.

If anything has the potential for undermining the legitimacy of the Afghan government in the future, it is the billions of dollars in foreign aid and the country's immense natural wealth. The resource curse is a paradox that many political scientists have studied in an attempt to understand why countries with natural wealth do not develop efficient institutions and legitimate government. In *The Future of Freedom*, Fareed Zakaria explains this paradox. In a country without natural resources, the government can only raise funds by taxing the population. For this to be possible, the citizenry must have enough financial security to be taxed. More importantly, the government must be perceived as legitimate and provide services in return for taxes. Zakaria writes, "Easy money means a government does not need to tax its citizens. When a government taxes people it has to provide benefits in return, beginning with services, accountability and good governance but ending up with liberty and representation," (Zakaria 75). The easy money he refers to is revenue from natural resources and foreign aid. Afghanistan is the recipient of billions in foreign aid and is endowed with possibly trillions of dollars worth of minerals. The Afghan government does not need to tax its people. Therefore, it has no motivation or need to earn legitimacy.

Services, accountability and good governance are only part of the equation of taxation. The citizenry must have enough economic security to be taxed. Afghanistan simply does not meet those economic standards. Zakaria draws upon the work of Adam Przeworski and Fernando

Limongi to explain the economic prerequisites of stable democracy. Their studies have found that countries with a per capita income of \$1500 has a life expectancy of eight years. Once per capita income reaches \$6000 dollars, democracy becomes institutionalized (Zakaria 69-70). Afghanistan has an income per capita of \$800 (CIA World Factbook).

Such issues are far beyond the scope of tribal engagement teams. It illustrates, though, that Afghan society is not sufficiently developed to sustain a viable democracy. While tribal engagement cannot directly address the profound economic woes of Afghanistan, it does seek to reestablish the tribal structure that has suffered from thirty years of civil war. The intent of tribal engagement is to train villages to provide security for themselves. Reestablishing tribal society, however, would also provide a strong base for civil society, a necessary component for liberal democracy.

Without a strong civil society and institutions that are independent of the central government, even a democracy will become murderous and oppressive. In Western civilization, the separation of church and state in the latter days of the Roman Empire was the first step towards liberalism. Although the Roman Catholic Church is not liberal in and of itself, its opposition to the state put limits on government rule (Zakaria 33). This separation between church and state does not exist in the Muslim world. In Afghanistan, tribal society can act as the counterweight to the central government to ensure it does not get out of control. Tribal engagement will not undermine the legitimacy of the central Afghan government. In fact, it will demand legitimacy.