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# SPECIAL REPORT

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## ABOUT THE REPORT

Youth and young political leaders are reshaping Afghan politics, even as they and ostensibly Western-style civil society groups operate in a political system dominated by commanders and other power brokers from an earlier generation. Drawing on over a hundred interviews, this report examines the potential space for youth in Afghanistan's political landscape, highlighting some of the major issues confronting young people that are likely to be common in other parts of Afghanistan. The work builds on several initiatives by the United States Institute of Peace and will be complemented by a broader, national-level study.

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*Anna Larson and Noah Coburn*

# Youth Mobilization and Political Constraints in Afghanistan

## The Y Factor

### Summary

- As Afghanistan prepares for presidential elections in 2014, many young people are vocal about how the system appears to limit their meaningful participation in politics.
- Historically, young people in Afghanistan have challenged the status quo. However, it is possible to detect a declining trend from the early twentieth century to the present in the extent to which these challenges have been able to effect change in the political system. This trend has continued despite the technology and social media available to youth today, as the older generation of political leaders continues to monopolize the available political space and act as gatekeepers to that space.
- Politically active youth have formed new political entities, ranging from new parties to more informal gatherings where politics, culture, or other issues are discussed. Most of those involved in these activities report great difficulty in mobilizing effectively without the support of older, ethnically based parties that are dominated by the political old guard. In several cases, especially where new groups have demonstrated a visible capacity for organized action, established leaders have actively suppressed these groups.
- Despite the political difficulties, in more rural areas, young men have been able to take advantage of the tensions between older leaders to secure political and economic resources for themselves.
- In the election, youth may be inclined to vote across traditional ethnic and party lines to support candidates who represent their aspirations, regardless of ethnicity. Further, they may be able to translate their potential to vote as a bloc of young people into political resources and economic opportunities, if not real political reform.

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- Simultaneously, however, the current barriers to meaningful political participation and the systematic marginalization of new voices will continue to alienate and potentially radicalize Afghan youth if real political changes are not made.

## Introduction

The year 2014 presents a series of major political changes for Afghanistan, from the withdrawal of international troops to the transition of presidential power by election for the first time in Afghanistan's history. At the same time, a more subtle series of political changes are taking place as Afghanistan's population expands and grows more youthful. With 34 percent of all Afghans between the ages of ten and twenty-four, population demographics are changing fast, and the majority now has little if any personal memory of the jihad against the Soviets or the Afghan civil war.<sup>1</sup> Despite this change in demographics, a list of the dominant political leaders during those times remains shockingly similar to the list of those that hold influence today.

There is little doubt that a rapidly expanding young population affects a country's political landscape. A so-called youth bulge is often considered a negative phenomenon in developing nations, contributing to the increased likelihood of conflict due to increasing numbers of unemployed young men.<sup>2</sup> In other circumstances, such as the postwar baby boom of the 1950s in the United States, a rapidly expanding youth population contributed to other forms of political and social change as well as economic growth.

This report sets out to explore some of the potential political consequences of the youth bulge in Afghanistan, detailing some likely obstacles and possibilities for increased youth participation in Afghan politics. It considers the consequences of youth activity (and inactivity), particularly for the elections of 2014, but also looks beyond the polls. Taking a detailed ethnographic approach, this report focuses on four diverse case studies around Kabul province, all of which raise distinct questions about youth political activity: the neighborhood of Dasht-e Barchi, where Hazara youth have been involved in a number of recent protests; the two ethnically mixed districts of Qara Bagh and Bagram, the political economies of which have been significantly affected by the presence of international troops (the massive Bagram Airbase is located in the vicinity); and Kabul University, a hotbed of political movements in the 1960s and 1970s and one of the only places composed of a large concentration of youth from around the country. The ethnographic approach facilitates a deeper and more detailed analysis of local political issues, which, while not necessarily representative of the country as a whole, provokes important questions about the nature of youth and politics in Afghanistan, which are then explored across a broader sample of cases in the forthcoming nationwide study.

In exploring the nuances of political activity among young people in Kabul, it is crucial to avoid generalizations about them being "enlightened," "elite," "educated," or "Westernized," as international actors often describe them. These labels tend to conceal the intricate realpolitik that more often determines how youth mobilize in and around the city. The urban youth and their more rural counterparts in Qara Bagh and Bagram featured in this study had to address the political reality of being young and potentially active in a political landscape dominated by a ruling elite, including local elites made up of former commanders and corrupt officials. To explore these intricacies, over one hundred interviews were conducted in the four field sites between June and September 2013. Efforts were made to conduct interviews with both men and women (though there were more interviews with men) of a variety of ethnicities, including those who were politically active and those who were more apathetic toward politics.

A key theme that emerges across the case studies is that the extent to which a group of young people appears to be politically mobilized, according to Western standards of civil society activism, is not directly proportional to that group's effectiveness in reforming the political system. A more nuanced understanding of how youth are both mobilizing and thinking about politics more generally should facilitate a more accurate analysis of what is happening at the local level in Afghanistan and shed light on how international actors can better support young people as they navigate a highly corrupt political system. The political future of Afghanistan may be determined by whether politically active youth are ultimately stifled by the system they have grown up in or whether they are able to use, challenge, and potentially transform it to work for new political purposes.

## Four Cases

Qara Bagh is a semirural area about an hour north of Kabul by road. Young people there face a number of hazards in attempting to engage with politics in Afghanistan. The area is politically dominated by a member of parliament; his brother, a former-commander; the district governor; and a number of their rivals, most of whom were prominent in local militias during the civil war and the Taliban period. With a strong international presence in the area supporting the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police, most of these tensions have not developed into overt confrontation, though small-scale localized violence—particularly kidnappings and assassinations—are reported with increasing frequency. Most of these local political leaders have struggled quietly to solidify patronage networks and secure resources. During the elections in 2009 and 2010, they were particularly active as political brokers, selling blocks of votes from the communities across Qara Bagh to national-level political leaders.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, while these leaders have adapted and changed their approaches over the past decade to match the post-2001 political order, the main political players are the same individuals as those who held influence before the intervention, and they have effectively used their influence, including over the electoral system, to block the emergence of new political players. It is within this commander-dominated landscape, resistant to change, that young people are attempting to mobilize.

Bagram, located just north of Qara Bagh, presents some interesting contrasts despite the two districts' relative proximity. Located adjacent to Bagram Airbase, which has housed up to twenty thousand international troops, the area has seen a massive influx of funds in the form of development projects, wages from laborers working on the base, and contracts going to local merchants. While a class of former commanders similar to those in Qara Bagh dominates the political scene in Bagram, leaders who have been able to secure contracts from the base or are associated with it in other ways have been able to assert their influence. Many local commanders with ties to the Northern Alliance (which supported the initial U.S. invasion) moved quickly into the security industry, then contracting for military construction projects, and finally development projects more generally. This progression led to the emergence of a hybrid commander-merchant-contractor model of leadership and resource control that contrasts with the more historical commander or elder model.<sup>4</sup> With the drawdown of international troops, however, there is an understanding that the money generated by the presence of the base will decline. In response to this potential decline, many local political leaders seem aware that they need to work harder to secure the support of the local community, since it will become increasingly difficult for them to simply purchase it using resources and jobs extracted from the base. Active young people here are contending with both an established set of powerholders and an adaptable group of leaders who fear their own source of power is being threatened.

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Situated to the west of the center of Kabul, Dasht-e Barchi is part of the suburban hinterlands of the city. It is a relatively self-contained, semi-urban area with its own market. It has recently seen myriad educational centers emerge in response to young residents' demands to further their studies in private institutions. The area has expanded rapidly over the past few years, particularly as a result of migration to Kabul from three rural and predominantly Hazara-populated regions: Jaghori (Ghazni), Behsud (Wardak), and Bamiyan. Distinct communities from these three places have formed in separate geographical clusters across Dasht-e Barchi with close and sometimes insular networks emerging among residents from the same place of origin. Horizontal linkages across these three groups are generally rare, as each has its own patronage networks with connections (*wasita*) to influential people. Dasht-e Barchi has become known across Kabul for its active political culture, particularly among young people. Numerous demonstrations and rallies have been organized there over the last few years, confirming Western impressions of a well-organized and coordinated indigenous civil society among the Hazara community. Again, the reality is more complex.

The fourth area, Kabul University, holds symbolic significance as Afghanistan's most prestigious institution of higher education, where many of the country's most recognizable names began their political careers. Today's students are cognizant of the reputation that the university still holds as an incubator of an earlier generation's leaders.<sup>5</sup> The university environment in which they find themselves in 2013, however, is markedly different from the one in which their predecessors emerged. The current political and social conditions around the school are leading students to increasingly emphasize the social divisions among them, such as tribe and ethnicity, under the watchful eyes of a wary and aging network of powerholders who are nervous about the potential political instability the students could create.

In 2011–12, the university had 15,214 students, 3,700 of whom were women.<sup>6</sup> There is a high demand for limited places—particularly in certain faculties, such as medicine—creating a fair degree of competition among students to achieve top marks in the Concours university entrance exam. Students' scores in this exam—taken by all high school graduates across the country with aspirations toward higher education—determine not only the faculty in which they are allowed to study but also whether or not they will be given a position in the university dormitories (or if there is no space, given financial assistance from the government to pay for their lodging during studies). Although the system for grading the (multiple-choice) exam has recently been computerized, rumors of cheating and corruption are common. One story we were told involved a student who stole the answer sheet before the exam and sold it to others for \$100,000. These rumors, along with those that abound about students using their families' political status and personal connections to secure positions, contribute to the perception that corruption and patronage lie just below the surface of even this supposed meritocracy. In contrast with student political engagement in the 1960s and 1970s, which tended to be along ideological lines, the current presence of youth that are connected with existing political elites is likely to drive engagement toward factional lines.

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## **A History of Youth Mobilization**

In a country where power is often assumed to be in the hands of the elders in a family or community, the enthusiasm and drive of active young people to challenge the status quo have surfaced at several points in Afghanistan's political history. Any analysis of political activity in Afghanistan needs to consider the historical context in which it occurs, particularly because Afghanistan as a society is historically extraordinarily self-aware. It thus makes sense to situate youth activity in Kabul alongside earlier social and political reform movements. The old guard of Afghan politics themselves came to prominence through youth

activism, especially centered around university politics, and their reactions to today's youth politics may be shaped by their own experience, just as today's activities try to contend with the enduring presence of the old guard.<sup>7</sup>

The terms of Afghanistan's modernist political development were mostly set by Mahmud Beg Tarzi, editor of a modernizing and nationalist newspaper and trusted adviser to King Habibullah Khan. Tarzi, who became King Amanullah's father-in-law when the young king married Tarzi's daughter Soraya, led a group named the Afghanan-e Jawan (Young Afghans), modeled on the Young Turks, who pushed for independence from Britain.<sup>8</sup> Inspired by his writings, young people bent on constitutional reform began clandestine meetings in the early twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> This group inspired the next generation of reformers, the Awakened Youth, or Wesh Dzalman (WD). The WD movement began in 1947 from Pashtun nationalist roots and expanded to embrace a wider reform agenda.<sup>10</sup> Afghanistan's reform movements were nonetheless hampered by institutional, social, and political conditions that increasingly limited the effect that young people were able to have on the political landscape. The twentieth century was dominated by struggles between reformers and traditionalists resistant to reform, with youth groups arrayed on both sides. It is perhaps surprising that, despite a considerable effort at political modernization, there is much less space and opportunity for young people now to organize and promote issues-based reform.

The Afghanan-e Jawan movement had its origins in growing pressure from reformists in court pushing for constitutional changes under Habibullah. They continued to exert influence when Amanullah, Habibullah's son, came to the throne and succeeded in securing the nation's first written constitution. This constitution disappointed reformers due to the concessions made to religious conservatives, who themselves refused to accept the document due to the extent of the reforms it proposed.<sup>11</sup> Courting conservatives for support while simultaneously assuring the Kabul intelligentsia that he was not beholden to rural clerics, the king could not convince either camp of his sincerity. Ultimately, the heavy-handedness of his approach to reform, along with its lack of substance, resulted in revolt from the countryside.<sup>12</sup> This revolt came just as the king, in his successful push for independence, had forgone the military and financial support of the British and brought about his flight and abdication.

Young reformists continued to wield influence in Kabul, however, as the Musahiban dynasty consolidated its hold over the country. Their ideas for a new Afghanistan, alongside a new generation of educated youth springing from Amanullah's emphasis on expanding access to schooling, ensured that continual, growing pressure was placed on the monarchy to open up the political environment in Kabul. Under the premiership of Shah Mahmud Khan, in the early years of the reign of the young king Zahir Shah—who assumed the throne at the age of nineteen when his father was assassinated in 1933—a number of reforms were made. Two years after its establishment, WD saw five of its members elected to parliament in 1949 in relatively free elections in which the government intervened less than it had done previously, and opposition groups, or at least dissenting voices, were able to win seats for the first time.<sup>13</sup> A flurry of publications promoting alternative political visions were printed, generating issues-based debates and criticism of the regime's policies among the intelligentsia. These debates were far more substantive than the equivalent debates today, which tend to respect ethnic lines and only tepidly criticize the Karzai regime due to fears of losing access to government patronage.

Afghanistan's period of relative political freedom did not last long. In the early 1950s, political publications were banned, and a number of opposition groups were forced underground.<sup>14</sup> Threatened by the popularity of these groups, the ruling powers imprisoned a number of key leaders and repressed political activism. The king also retracted several of the WD movement's key gains resulting from pressure on the government, such as greater

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freedom of the press. Nevertheless, the precedent had been set for political concessions to be made as a result of youth activism.

At the same time, while the government was nervous about allowing opposition movements to develop, they were keen to expand spending on education in the country, which increased throughout the 1950s.<sup>15</sup> As Antonio Giustozzi points out, however, the government did not intend to use education to cultivate leadership potential for the future;<sup>16</sup> education functioned to demonstrate to other nations that Afghanistan was modernizing. Perhaps inevitably, the students themselves did not share these limited and technocratic visions for the university. By the 1960s, they were active on campus and mobilizing around several prominent political ideologies. This effort coincided with Zahir Shah's New Democracy period, during which a new constitution was drafted in 1964 and an elected parliament was seated. On the left, the embryo of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) was forming as communist influences from Russia and China began to take hold.<sup>17</sup> Even further to the left were the so-called Maoists, Shola'i, who also had a sizeable following in the university at various points during the 1960s and 1970s. On the right, conservative Islam dominated the political scene with influences largely coming from Al-Azhar University in Cairo. Burhanuddin Rabbani, Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar were all students at Kabul before being trained in Cairo and returning to teach as members of the university's faculty of theology.

There were two striking features of the youth mobilization of the 1960s and 1970s at Kabul University. First, despite government policies that allowed this mobilization to take place, no groups appeared to form in support of the government; whether on the left or right, all opposed the ruling monarchical elite for different reasons.<sup>18</sup> Second, within each movement, young people seemed to form horizontal linkages with one another across ethnic, regional, and linguistic lines, ideology being the dominant form of group identification. Furthermore, the new emerging leaders—particularly on the left, where mobilization had begun earlier than among the Islamist groups—were free to ignore the court and its potential patronage, in part due to their support from outside powers (Russia, China, and Egypt primarily). Over time, Babrak Karmal, Nur Mohammad Taraki, and Hafizullah Amin on the left, and later Rabbani, Sayyaf, and Hekmatyar among the Islamists, would each create for themselves a cult of personality that generated its own concentric circles of loyalty and patronage. Initially, however, unlike today's youths, they were not blocked by rivals or predecessors who might have tried to force them into a patron-client relationship.

By the 1960s, the educational reforms earlier in the century and the gains that opposition groups had made at different points since then created space for politics away from the royal court. That Zahir Shah's reign had, unusually, seen no large-scale violent conflict allowed increased public spending in non-security sectors, such as higher education.<sup>19</sup> This period of prolonged security also allowed the establishment of trust among ethnic groups, demonstrating that ethnicity is not necessarily a deep-rooted source of division among Afghans, though leaders can exploit it as a tool to mobilize large groups of people easily in times of tension, when trust constricts to immediate clan, tribal, or ethnic groups. The court had used this period of stability to foster education with the intent of creating a cadre of technocrats that could work on its behalf. Instead it created a group of political idealists on both sides of the spectrum, which was not only un beholden to the palace but seen as an obstacle to their political projects and would soon demonstrate its capacity for extraordinarily destabilizing decisions.

Kabul University during the 1960s and 1970s provided an ideal platform for ideological linkages to overcome ethnic ones, at least initially among an increasingly politicized youth. Once Zahir Shah was overthrown in 1973 by his cousin, Daoud, who established a presidential republic, much more was at stake as political elites renegotiated the control of

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state resources and violence once again became a potential tool for political use. Leadership struggles became more intense and ethnic divisions that had not been present earlier began to divide ideological platforms into smaller class- and personality-based, and increasingly ethnically homogeneous, blocs. The PDPA split into Khalq (Pashtun tribal groups) and Parcham (largely Pashtun middle classes but with other groups also represented) under the leaderships of Taraki (and later Amin) and Karmal, respectively. On the conservative side of the spectrum, the Islamists began to divide into those mainly Shia groups supported by Iran (later referred to as the Tehran Eight) and those supported by Pakistan (the Peshawar Seven) once both were forced into exile by Daoud.

The period of exile demonstrated clearly how the youth mobilization of the 1960s and 1970s was actually less successful in creating space for political action than the Afghanan-e Jawan, WD, and other opposition groups had been in the 1930s and 1940s. Although the mobilization was rapid and directed against government policy, it had little influence over that policy. Opposition groups gained a few seats in parliament but could not affect legislation due to the lack of unified stances in the legislature and the king's overall control over laws, such as the oft-cited political party law, which was never ratified.<sup>20</sup> Space at the top that had been forged earlier was constricted, leading to a growing bubble of frustrated youth that had no place to mobilize. When the monarchy was toppled, it was from the inside, not from the outside. After the coup, Daoud, in the manner of old politics, constricted space even further, pushing the leftist and Islamist movements to the fringes, where they increasingly radicalized, taking power by force at the end of the decade (in the case of the leftists) and twenty years later (in the case of the Islamists).

The leaders of the Islamist groups that returned to fight for power in the 1990s still wield significant influence, denying the next generation the chances they themselves had at university to forge groups founded on ideological bases. Having developed expansive networks of personalized patronage systems, these leaders have no incentive to hand over control of their carefully constructed empires to a younger generation. As will be shown in the following, the extent of their control is sufficient to thwart even the most well-organized, motivated, and ostensibly unaligned young people in Kabul.

## What Youth Mobilization Means Now

Returning to the four local case studies to analyze how political opportunities for young people are evolving reveals some striking differences but also some continuities, particularly in how young people are limited in their attempts to create political change. The principal factors hindering youth mobilization across the four areas center around the older generation of leaders' stifling hold on power, whether locally, as commanders control resource flows to a specific district, or nationally, as ethnic party leaders keep young would-be challengers from rising up the ranks or developing new movements of their own. Because the patterns of control are different, so too are the patterns of reaction. There are nonetheless important parallels in the ways in which the current younger generation is attempting to carve out a political space for itself in a system dominated by a small, older group of elites. Only by understanding these patterns can efforts to help these groups have a chance to succeed.

### *Qara Bagh*

In Qara Bagh, there is at first little apparent space for youth to operate politically in the commander-dominated landscape. The area lacks overtly political youth organizations, such as youth wings of parties or the kinds of civic groups found more commonly in Kabul city. Because young people across Afghanistan are often averse to speaking about politics with anyone other

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than close relations anyway, it is not surprising that, when initially asked whether they were involved in politics (*siasi*), youth we interviewed in Qara Bagh overwhelmingly responded in the negative, even as many went on to describe activities that would generally be classed as very political. Despite their wariness, many respondents were keen to speak about the inequalities in their area in terms of access to resources and opportunities. A number of younger men have also been able to take advantage of some of the less obvious opportunities that the local patronage system affords by playing rival leaders off one another. While little to no overt political activity takes place among youth, youth associations exist that provide the opportunity for young people from different backgrounds and ethnicity across the district to meet together to socialize or play sports. Members of these groups talked about coming together in the elections to vote for one candidate and about how different local commanders appeared to be interested in having influence over them.

Although not explicitly political, some of the attempts to gather young people together for social purposes, such as playing sports, have genuinely political implications. In some instances, the formats that sports groups have taken resemble older forms of social and political association. One young man who was a well-known skateboarder in the area had trained other young people in skateboarding, who were then themselves training others, forming a network of skateboarding students that had interesting parallels with the way Sufi mystics have historically worked in the area. In other instances, organization has been more formal. The youth sports association in the district provides a space for young men from different ethnicities and political groupings to meet together mostly to play soccer and socialize. This effort has created an organization that cuts across ethnic lines in ways that most other political parties in the area do not.

When we went to interview the head of the official district youth association to explore organization issues further, we found three young men who claimed to be in charge. One had been assigned by the district governor and seemed to have the formal accreditation of leader, and yet the local parliamentarian who had been working against the district governor on several issues had also assigned a young man to lead the association; this man seemed to have greater access to funds and the resources needed to support the club. At the same time, another prominent local commander, concerned about the parliamentarian having too much influence over the youth, had assigned a third young man the task of organizing the group. This confusion generates a good deal of complexity and conflict, but it is also a situation that the three young men have been able to take advantage of. These young men and the rest of the group are becoming increasingly effective at playing the various leaders off one another and securing more funds for the association than they might have been able to if only one of the leaders was patron of the group. The rival leaders' attempts to meddle in the selection of group leader actually generated more resources and opportunities for these young leaders, but only because they remained united.

In the lead-up to the elections in 2014, there is a sense among the young men involved that the youth in the sports association and other such organizations can potentially serve as voting blocs that can gather together the votes of young people, which in turn can be sold through political voters to various candidates.<sup>21</sup> As various local powerholders work to position themselves against each other in the run-up to presidential and provincial council elections, young people we interviewed implied that while the political system in the area was unlikely to change, they could at least take advantage of it in some small ways.

### ***Bagram***

In nearby Bagram, youth are circumventing established routes to power and influence in slightly different ways. In some instances, younger men have been able to take advantage



of the potential contracts and other economic opportunities offered by the large U.S. military base and have become rich and influential in their own right, even while going out of their way to be perceived as respectful to the older generation of commanders. This desire to work within a system dominated by a group of elders contrasts with the more overt attempts by youth to reform or even upend the system that are more common in Dasht-e Barchi, discussed below.

One young businessman from a poor but well-connected family with links to several stronger commanders in the area has been particularly effective at securing contracts from the U.S. base. Originally the contracts he was awarded were for smaller construction projects, but eventually he became involved in supplying fuel, which has made him a millionaire despite his background and relatively young age. Not satisfied working simply as a businessman, the young man has some close relatives who other respondents mentioned as potential candidates for parliament, with the implication that the merchant himself would not run but would support these candidacies. The merchant clearly has political aspirations of his own but may judge that it is premature to act on them. In addition to his personal wealth, he has generated a fair amount of goodwill in the community by setting up a charity foundation that provides food and other supplies to poor families in the area. This foundation is headed by a council of older men who meet to determine how funds are distributed but also resolve low-level disputes between community members. Much of the funding for this foundation comes from the young businessman, but his foundation still clearly relies on the authority of these elders to generate political capital. This example of a young, relatively unconnected person being able to rise up to a position of authority and respect through channels that seem to combine more traditional values, such as honor, with a capitalist's business sense demonstrates the wide-reaching effects that the U.S. base has had in the region, as some young people have been able to use the opportunities it presents for both political and economic gain.

Unsurprisingly, there is some tension between the new foundation and the more recently established mujahideen shura, set up last year. This shura emerged as several commanders who had fought during the jihad against the Soviets decided to establish a council aimed at resolving local disputes and creating a forum for the discussion of local political issues. The prestige gained from effectively resolving disputes traditionally has translated into local political power in Afghanistan. In this case, the shura demonstrates one of the ways in which commanders are seeking alternative sources of legitimacy that might last beyond the patronage networks they have forged through the lucrative contracts awarded from the base. There is a youth wing of this recently established mujahideen shura, and its members work within the system to extract resources for their social and cultural activities, including the publication of a regular magazine. While some complain that the commanders are using the shura to resolve only smaller issues in order to divert attention from the ways in which they continue to dominate more important political issues in the area, the shura still has received generally good reviews from individuals living in the area. It also provides a welcome and more effective alternative to many of the weak government structures that have failed to provide services that residents expect. The commanders' shura works alongside, not in opposition to, these more formal institutions of government.

While there is little direct conflict between the mujahideen shura and the merchant's charitable foundation council, individuals associated with both spoke to us of the importance of ensuring that community members see both as effective. Both also have distributed food and other supplies on holidays to encourage community members to see them as particularly benevolent. The youth wing of the mujahideen shura and the merchant's charitable foundation council demonstrate how young people in Bagram appear to be

working within the existing system, going perhaps above the call of duty in demonstrating their respect for local elders and commanders but reaping rewards in both cases, whether in funding for cultural and social activities or in generating social status and respect for a young merchant whose route to influence has been somewhat unconventional.

### ***Dasht-e Barchi***

In Dasht-e Barchi, Hazara residents have become known for their political organization and activity in recent years. A number of factors contribute to this recognition. First, minority politics pervade people's sense of citizenship here. Marginalized in the past, Hazaras have forcefully grasped the new opportunities of participation and inclusion that the post-2001 environment has provided. Starting from a lower baseline of economic status and political experience than many other ethnic groups in the country, they have seen a rapid increase in levels of education and economic change. Tangible changes in this regard have perpetuated a sense of enthusiasm and determination among young Hazaras that often seemed missing from youth from other ethnic groups in Kabul. Second, with many returnees coming back to Kabul from long periods in Iran, the influence of that country's emphasis on education, and higher education in particular, is clear.

Third, the existence of two prominent Hazara leaders—Mohammad Mohaqqueq and Karim Khalili—and the expansive patronage networks they wield helped shape the way in which large groups of Dasht-e Barchi residents are mobilized politically. Claiming to represent Hazara interests in an environment of increasing uncertainty, these leaders are known for co-opting certain inflammatory issues as their own platforms for mobilization, such as land conflicts in the central highlands between Kuchi nomads and Hazara residents and recent tension at Kabul University (where discrimination against Hazara students was alleged, as described below). The leaders' abilities to take stands on such issues and use them to gain political capital is remarkable, and they have contributed to the strong performance of Hazara candidates in parliamentary elections in Kabul city, where thirteen out of thirty-three representatives elected in 2010 were Hazara. In emphasizing the differences between Hazaras and other groups, these leaders commanded a good deal of organized support for candidates they claimed would uphold Hazara minority interests once elected to office.

This is not to say that the majority of people living in Dasht-e Barchi do not question the support among Hazaras for their leaders. Indeed, particularly (but not exclusively) among young people, there is a sense of disillusionment with the old guard and anger and frustration at the level of influence they continue to wield. Many respondents complained bitterly in interviews about Mohaqqueq's and Khalili's levels of influence. After a recent failed attack against Mohaqqueq, our researchers heard voices in the crowd that had gathered in the wake of the explosion express disappointment that the target had been missed. While they were chastised by others, a few years ago, people would not have dared utter them at all for fear of being attacked by the mob. Dissatisfaction appears to be increasing, reflected in the creation of several movements and social organizations that claim to stand against these leaders.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, young people pay much less lip service to the old party leaders who dominate the patronage networks among Hazaras. A number of young activists are going out of their way to demonstrate independence from them. One such person is a younger Hazara parliamentarian, Dr. Jafar Mahdawi, who has formed a new party, Hezb-e Millat Afghanistan (Afghanistan National Party). According to respondents, his election campaign in 2010 seemed to emerge out of nowhere and gathered momentum very quickly in the run-up to the polls. Rather than publicly affiliate himself with Mohaqqueq or Khalili, however, as most other prominent Hazara candidates chose to do, Mahdawi added the face of Ali Mazari to his election posters. Mazari, assassinated by the Taliban in 1995, was a

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generation older than Khalili or Mohaqqueq. He had led a unified bloc of Hazaras before the split into the two current separate factions following his death. Mazari maintains the status of a martyred supreme leader of the Hazara minority and is therefore a unifying symbol that is difficult for either Khalili or Mohaqqueq to criticize.<sup>22</sup> In aligning himself with Mazari, Mahdawi avoided having to answer to one or the other main leaders while emphasizing the Hazara community as a whole. Since being elected, however, Mahdawi has attempted to assure Mohaqqueq and Khalili that he does not present a threat to them and is now perceived to be much less radical than his campaign initially suggested. One group of young people we spoke to said that they had been part of Mahdawi's party but left due to the lack of collective interests he represented and due to his personal ambition. While Mahdawi's political movement seemed to take off quickly, its ultimate political effects have been constrained by Khalili's and Mohaqqueq's continued firm grasp on power and actual resources.

Other groups in Dasht-e Barchi have formed around social, cultural, and charitable activities over the past few years. These include the Australian-funded Afghan Cultural House—which offers music, English, computer, and media courses for young people—and Life Is Beautiful, an organization supporting opium addicts—which is led by a young female activist and financed by her own business endeavors. Developing their own extensive networks of support among Hazara youth, both groups have been approached by Mohaqqueq and Khalili with offers of financial and other assistance in return for their support and the promise of bloc votes in upcoming elections. Both have apparently refused these offers and have had to deal with a fair amount of harassment as a result. As a member of one of the groups told us in an interview, “High-ranking people have come here asking us to campaign for them in elections. We said no, but they have persisted, trying to manipulate us and offering us money.” Both groups are concerned about maintaining their political independence, particularly if resources from the international community decline, forcing them to search elsewhere for funds. In contrast to young people in Qara Bagh and Bagram, and despite (or perhaps because of) their high levels of organization and education, youth in Dasht-e Barchi appear to be less able to overcome the barriers of patronage politics than their counterparts in more rural areas of Kabul province.

### ***Kabul University***

In Kabul University, young people have been actively mobilizing through protests over various issues for the best part of the decade of international intervention. Political activities and unions are discouraged on campus, although students attribute this ban on collective political to the Office of the President of the University rather than any written law. Nevertheless, any student caught actively organizing political gatherings is subject to reprimand and even punishment. Student activities are monitored by teachers but also by frequent visits of undercover staff from the government's internal security organization, the National Directorate of Security, who students said are easy to identify but nevertheless maintain a watchful eye on any dissident behavior.<sup>23</sup> Despite these government measures, students are connected to political networks, parties, and individuals outside the university campus. These connections range from informal student groups that meet off campus for social events and study (but also to meet with party leaders) to lodgings provided for provincial students by their members of parliament (MPs) as a means for MPs to generate support in their home provinces and make a link with the symbolically prestigious university. Students have been able to use these connections to help them mobilize politically over some issues, such as the long-running furor over the use of the Dari word *danishgah* for university rather than the Pashto *pohantoon*. Interestingly, and indicative of the way in which there is little space for unaligned political discussion within the university, the students enrolled in the

political science faculty are considered by other students to be connected to parties and powerholders, simply by virtue of the subject they study. There appears to be little concept of studying politics as an academic discipline.

One recent example of a demonstration at the university, in May 2013, had to do with student complaints about the quality of teaching. Originally raised by a group of students from different ethnicities, the dispute was quickly framed as an issue of ethnic discrimination against Hazara students. Several months earlier, in December 2012, the university had been forced to close for three months following clashes over Shia Ashura celebrations in which three students had been killed, setting a precedent for the ethnicization of campus clashes. These ethnic divides were further accentuated when Hazara political leaders publicly supported the demonstrations—in part, many complained, to cash in on the publicity created by the students.<sup>24</sup> Sadly, violent confrontations between Sunni and Shia students appear to be increasingly common, with clashes also having taken place at Kabul Polytechnic University more frequently over the last year.<sup>25</sup>

Almost without exception, students we spoke to discussed openly the nature of ethnic divisions in the university, blaming party leaders and neighboring countries (who are perceived as supporting one ethnic group over the others) for intervening and exacerbating tensions for their own political purposes. As discussed above, this was not the case in the 1960s and 1970s at the university, where student groups and unions made far greater progress toward mobilizing around ideological bases. These tensions in Kabul University and the problems that youth in Dasht-e Barchi face while trying to organize politically indicate that, while sharing certain approaches to political obstacles created by the ruling elite with other youth across the province, Hazara youth in Kabul are having a more difficult time than others overcoming these barriers, despite their ostensible embrace of the Western-style civil society commonly associated with democracy.

Why is this? The answer has partly to do with the contrast between what appears on the surface to be a vibrant civil society and what is in fact a community dominated by patronage networks among the Hazaras, just as much if not more strongly than other groups in Afghanistan.<sup>26</sup> Iranian influence may also play a role in limiting the extent to which new young leaders can emerge among the Hazaras, although this research did not delve in to this issue specifically. What is clear, however, is that despite the significant resources available to urban young people in Dasht-e Barchi—most of whom are English-speaking, computer literate, and increasingly connected on social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter—the old leaders still maintain their stranglehold.

### ***The Importance of Social Networks***

Social networking has played a significant role in the lives of urban Afghan youth. The use of technology is common to the attempts of young people in these four areas to mobilize politically, and international donors have made much of the potential role of social media in Afghanistan and elsewhere. It was striking in our interviews, however, how limited the effects of these forms of community had been on actual political change, despite their prevalence and widespread use.

Some groups, particularly those in Dasht-e Barchi and at Kabul University, had Facebook pages that they used to communicate, but there was little concrete evidence of this inspiring serious political change; many of the commanders in the political elite also have such pages.<sup>27</sup> If in the West—and recently in the Middle East—Twitter and Facebook have allowed individuals to share information with each other quickly in order to protest injustices by politicians, in Afghanistan, where youth action is being strictly limited, sharing such information does little to change the system itself. It has actually accentuated some

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of the negative aspects of the existing system, with ethnic tensions playing out even more aggressively online than they do in reality due to the Internet providing anonymous platforms for voicing opinions.

In contrast, a few young people expressed hope that the growing television culture in Afghanistan, which is dominated by talk shows and soap operas (the most popular recently from Turkey), would increasingly force politicians to confront their constituents on television programs, while exposing the population to other political systems viewed indirectly through foreign serials (e.g., the popular Indian *Tulsi* program aired on Tolo, an Afghan television station). Youth suggested that more exposure to such programs might slowly inspire cultural change, but few saw it having a serious effect on current political conditions.

## Prospects for the Future

Unsurprisingly, 2014 looms large for most of the young people we interviewed. The combination of the presidential election that should bring to power the first president after Karzai and the completion of international troops' withdrawal has left many Afghans, and young people in particular, concerned about political instability and access to economic resources in the future. As Karzai steps down and negotiations with the Taliban continue to be discussed, young people are also worried that the next regime, however it comes about, will further limit their political opportunities.

The election of 2014 may present some opportunities for young people that are not apparent in analyses based on Western definitions of civil society. While new, small parties that tend to attract young people may still be forced to work within patronage systems dominated by their elders, there is evidence that young people, recognizing the value of their votes, will attempt to at least gain something from the current system. Most youth spoke idealistically about elections in theory, but many inside and outside Kabul acknowledged that they are at least considering selling their votes to politicians. Clubs or associations of all kinds that bring together a large number of young people are particularly appealing to politicians looking for votes, and youth in both Dasht-e Barchi and Bagram spoke of eventually selling the votes of a large number of young people to certain candidates.

Of course, others hope to participate in the elections in a way that Western conventions consider more legitimate—that is, by voting to support the candidate they believe best represents their political interests. Many of these expressed their desire for more transparency, whether through politicians on television talk shows or outreach to young people. Certain political parties are perceived as slightly more friendly to the younger generation. Even most of these voters, however, acknowledged that real change was unlikely and that the continued practice of backroom negotiations between elite politicians served as the ultimate evidence of the flaws of the current political system.<sup>28</sup>

As the international community continues to think about ways to encourage young people to mobilize in the hopes of inspiring democratic reform, there are several potentially worrying lessons that these case studies suggest. First, the organizations that most closely resemble democratic organizations in the Western sense are not necessarily the most effective at encouraging reform. Giving funds to this type of group could create perverse incentives, inspiring organizations to appear more and more Western in order to receive support but making them less and less organic and effective at mobilizing young people. There are also potential consequences to supporting youth mobilization in a society dominated by patronage networks and former commanders. The case of a new commander, contractor, or merchant leadership model that seems to be emerging around Bagram suggests that people are not necessarily committed to democratic reform just because they are young.

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By thinking more broadly, however, there are ways to encourage political spaces for young people that are not dominated by certain parties or national-level political leaders. Spaces that on the surface appear apolitical—associations such as sports clubs—can still encourage young people to organize and discuss their political concerns in a forum that is free from the control of local elites. Such spaces need not be physical. Television, particularly talk shows that discuss political issues, and the Internet allow for politically transparent conversations that are not available for young people elsewhere.<sup>29</sup>

Beyond 2014, it is less clear what role youth will play in Afghan politics. There is a demographic inevitability to the sheer number of young people who will join the ranks of voters in the next decade. These youth will face economic and political challenges, yet also have great potential. A far greater percentage of them are educated than in their parent's generation, and they are more likely to have spent time abroad, to have been exposed to new ideas through television and other forms of media, and to have come of age during one of the most democratic periods in Afghanistan's history. And yet in a political system that stifles opposition, these characteristics of post-2001 youth may engender disillusionment—or worse, radicalization, as occurred in the generation of young people active in the 1960s and 1970s. The elections of 2014 and the changing political circumstances in the coming years will do much to determine whether, as these young people come of age, their energy can be harnessed for constructive democratic reform or whether the youth bulge will further destabilize the country.

## Notes

1. Population Reference Bureau, "The World's Youth, 2013 Data Sheet," available at [www.prb.org](http://www.prb.org) (accessed November 17, 2013).
2. Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers*, vol. 56, no. 4 (2004); R. Cincotta, "Youth Bulge, Underemployment Raise Risks of Civil Conflict," Global Security Brief no. 2, Worldwatch Institute, 2005; Paul Collier, *Wars, Guns, and Votes: Democracy in Dangerous Places* (London: The Bodley Head, 2009), 95. For a useful critique on these perspectives, see Harini Amarasinghe, Canan Gündüz, and Markus Mayer, "Rethinking the Nexus between Youth, Unemployment and Conflict—Perspectives from Sri Lanka," London: International Alert, 2009.
3. For more, see Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, *Derailing Democracy in Afghanistan: Elections in an Unstable Political Landscape* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), chapter 5.
4. For more on this contrast, see Noah Coburn, *Bazaar Politics: Power and Pottery in an Afghan Market Town* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), chapter 6.
5. A. Giustozzi, "Between Patronage and Rebellion: Student Politics in Afghanistan," Kabul: AREU, 2010.
6. Central Statistics Office, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, CSO Education Table 4.2, available at <http://cso.gov.af/Content/Files/Education%20syb.pdf> (accessed November 17, 2013).
7. USIP's forthcoming special report on youth politics at the national level will address post-2001 history in greater depth due to its particular relevance to elections preparations.
8. T. 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), 3.
9. L. Dupree, *Afghanistan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 437.
10. T. Ruttig, *Islamists*, 4.
11. M. Ewans, *Afghanistan: A Short History of Its People and Politics* (London: Harper Collins, 2002), 128.
12. L. Dupree, *Afghanistan*, 451.
13. T. Ruttig, *Islamists*, 5.
14. *Ibid.*, 5; Giustozzi, "Between Patronage and Rebellion," 2.
15. Giustozzi, "Between Patronage and Rebellion," 2.
16. *Ibid.*, 1.
17. Other international influences growing in prominence at the time were the attempts of foreign powers to try to shape the Afghan educational system, not only at the secondary level with internationally sponsored high schools, such as Isteqlal, Amani, and the American High School, but also by adopting faculties within the university or, in the case of the engineering faculty that was adopted by the Americans, creating new ones like the Soviet-built Polytechnic.
18. Giustozzi, "Between Patronage and Rebellion," 3.
19. Although in most sectors, there was certainly not as much spending on public goods as might be imagined due to low tax revenues. Here it is important to note foreign powers' interest and investment in higher education in Afghanistan, particularly with the competition for influence in the country between the Soviet Union and United States during the Cold War.
20. See L. Dupree, "Afghanistan Continues Its Experiment in Democracy: The Thirteenth Parliament Is Elected," American Universities Field Staff Reports 15.3, South Asia Series, 1971; and M.G. Weinbaum, "Afghanistan: Nonparty Parliamentary Democracy," *Journal of Developing Areas* vol. 7, no. 1 (1972): 57–74.
21. For more on how these processes work, see in particular Coburn and Larson, *Derailing Democracy*, chapter 5.
22. For more information on recent divisions among Hazaras, see Niamatullah Ibrahim "The Dissipation of Political Capital among Afghanistan's Hazaras: 2001–09," Working Paper 51, no. 2, Crisis States Research Centre, London School of Economics, London, 2009.
23. Thanks to Alim Remtulla, an independent journalist working on youth movements at Kabul University, personal communication, August 2013.
24. While at first, as a result of the protests, university authorities had agreed to dismiss two teachers connected with the most serious complaints, after the involvement of Mohaqqueq and disruptions by students demonstrating in the university mosques where other students were studying for exams, the authorities retracted their decision.
25. See Bawar Melli Warzapana (National Trust News) at <http://www.taand.com/archives/10468> (accessed November 17, 2013)
26. Further, it is arguable that given the small size of the Hazara minority compared to the other prominent ethnic blocs (Pashtuns and Tajiks), there only appears to be space for one or two key leaders. Tajiks are generally much less able to vote in organized ethnic blocs, partly due to the group's tendency to organize regionally and to the high number of prominent Tajik figures that emerged during the Soviet occupation. As a result, politics works around local commanders and leaders rather than around national-level ethnic group leaders.
27. While it is tempting to argue that there is a rural-urban technological divide, perhaps due to the lack of a landline infrastructure, even in rural areas it is common to find young people with smart phones that connect them to a wider world and serve as status symbols.
28. During the research period a series of high-level meetings were held among several elite potential candidates. One at Dostum's house drew particular attention and was perceived as a harbinger of future elite manipulation of the electoral process.
29. For more concrete recommendations, see Anna Larson, Casey Johnson and Noah Coburn, "Out with the Old? Youth Mobilization and its Limits in Afghanistan for 2014," Peace Brief, United States Institute of Peace, forthcoming.

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