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SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report explores the process and outcome of Afghanistan's 2014 presidential election from a limited access social order perspective. Under the threat of postelection violence, nontransparent, internationally mediated bargaining led to a negotiated result that accommodated the runner-up in the initial vote count, by creating a new high-level government position for him and giving him a share in ministerial nominations. The report points out the contradictions, clashes, and perverse effects that can arise when democratic institutional forms such as elections are imposed on a limited access order, especially a fragile one like Afghanistan.

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SPECIAL REPORT 370

APRIL 2015

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Understanding Afghanistan's 2014 Presidential Election

The Limits to Democracy in a Limited Access Order

Summary

- The 2014 Afghan presidential election was followed by a peaceful transfer of power to a new president and administration, but not through a democratic electoral process.
- Under the threat of postelection violence, nontransparent, internationally mediated bargaining between the top two vote-getters led to division of ministerial nominations between them and the creation of a new, high-level government position for the runner-up.
- Contemporary research suggests that in low-income countries characterized by limited access in economic and political spheres, armed elites' bargaining and agreement over the division of resources helps minimize violence and maintains a modicum of political stability, but this is inconsistent with democratic processes.
- The international intervention (led by the United States and with heavy UN involvement) to mediate the postelection negotiations distorted Afghanistan's "political marketplace" and left problems in its wake, inhibiting political development and most likely undermining the legitimacy of and popular participation in future Afghan elections.
- In fragile limited access societies, attention should be focused more on developing viable political institutions, without which elections cannot achieve the results expected of them, and less on each individual election and its mechanics.
- Finally, elections in these situations should not be made even more difficult and risky by combining them with other major turning points (such as withdrawal of international troops), nor should holding elections be taken either as a marker for completion of an international intervention or as a signal that it is time to drastically reduce financial or other support.

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Introduction

Afghanistan's 2014 presidential election led to a peaceful transfer of power to a new president, but not through a democratic process. Intense, internationally mediated bargaining resulted in the formation of a national unity government, including a new chief executive officer position for the runner-up and the "equitable" distribution of ministerial appointments between the CEO and the new president. Moreover, despite a complete audit of second-round votes, conducted at the request of both parties, the final election results were not officially announced. The postvoting process and outcome left many bewildered.

The election is a good example of the contradictions, clashes, and perverse effects that can arise when democratic practices such as elections are superimposed on what Douglass C. North and colleagues describe as a fragile limited access order, one in which access to economic resources and political power is available only to elites rather than to the population as a whole. A characteristic of such a social order is the decentralized control rather than state control over groups capable of armed violence, which means that elite bargains are what keep the peace and maintain a modicum of political stability. Elections, with their inevitable winners and losers, can be destabilizing under such circumstances. In Afghanistan in 2014, election-related violence and a breakdown in the political transition fortunately were avoided, but only by overlaying the election with a nontransparent elite bargaining process between the two candidates and their camps. Further, 2014 is the second Afghan presidential election in which the international community intervened heavily, with mixed and problematic results. The new political arrangement, whatever its benefits, has built-in problems for the future and may well weaken the government's ability to implement reforms.

This report draws on the violence and social orders framework developed by North and colleagues and on other literature to explore the 2014 election process and its outcome. In particular, the 2014 experience shows that the mechanics of holding elections are only part of the story. Further technical improvements will not resolve the inherent disconnect between elections and the political logic of a limited access order. There needs to be less focus on holding elections per se, and much more on developing viable political institutions. Expectations need to be kept modest, and the risk of elections worsening or destabilizing the political situation mitigated.

The 2014 Afghan Presidential Election

The yearlong election process for Afghanistan's first presidential election without an incumbent on the ballot saw some major achievements before its final stages.¹ Initially there had been widespread skepticism, including doubts in some quarters as to whether the incumbent, President Hamid Karzai, would leave office, or whether he would manipulate the election to favor a chosen protégé. Fortunately, these fears did not materialize. High levels of public interest and participation characterized the campaigning period. A first round of voting was successfully held on April 5, 2014, with an unexpectedly high turnout and less than expected violence. A second round between the top two first-round vote-getters, Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani, occurred on June 14. Preliminary results for the second round, released by Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission (IEC), showed Ghani winning by more than a million votes.²

But when it became apparent that reported turnout in the second round was considerably higher than in the first round, with the additional turnout concentrated largely in Pashtun areas, which went overwhelmingly for Ghani, the Abdullah campaign and its supporters immediately alleged that massive electoral fraud was stealing the election from Abdullah.

While fraud allegations are nothing new in Afghan elections (or in many other countries' elections), the sheer volume and repetition of these allegations were striking. Even in the face of the large disparity between the initially reported vote totals of the two candidates, the Abdullah campaign argued that the election outcome was being determined by fraud, refusing to accept even the possibility that it might have legitimately lost the election. Further, some of Abdullah's supporters warned of street protests and uncontrollable violence, and even a threat to form a *parallel government* (whose meaning was far from clear). In sum, the situation was turning very ugly amid threats that the political transition would violently break down.

Alarmed international partners, led by the U.S. government and with heavy UN involvement, intervened at the highest level (the interventions included phone calls to the candidates from President Barack Obama and two visits to Kabul by Secretary of State John Kerry), calling on both sides to eschew violence and prevailing on them to engage in internationally mediated negotiations to achieve a peaceful election outcome. During the first visit by Secretary Kerry, in July 2014, the parties agreed that, irrespective of the election outcome, a *government of national unity* would be formed, prominently including the losing side, for which a new position of CEO would be created.

The two sides also agreed on an unprecedented 100 percent audit of the second-round votes, facilitated by the UN and involving both campaigns as well as the IEC. This expensive and time-consuming process faced numerous problems, yet it was completed within a fairly short period, the logistical and political complexities notwithstanding. However, as it became increasingly apparent that, not least because of the sheer arithmetic of the situation, the initially announced result favoring Ghani would not be reversed by the audit, the Abdullah campaign, after several pullouts and threats thereof, boycotted completion of the audit.³ Intense behind-the-scenes bargaining occurred over the agreed-upon national unity government. The Abdullah side attempted to secure as many powers as possible for the new CEO position and to maximize Abdullah's role in selecting nominees for ministers and other senior positions.

As the specifics of the political agreement were hammered out, it became apparent that, remarkably, one of the sticking points in the negotiations was whether the final outcome of the election would be publicly announced at all, ostensibly because of concerns that doing so would inflame already upset Abdullah supporters, who would take to the streets, perhaps violently. Even more surprising, non-announcement of the final election results became part of the agreement, even though the audit had been agreed to by all parties, its procedures had been negotiated by both sides, and scores of representatives from both camps, along with more than a hundred international election experts, had overseen it. In the end, then, there was an outcome, an inauguration, the establishment of a national unity government, and an implied acceptance of the new president, but never a public concession that one side had lost the election, or any official announcement of the election results.

How could this long and arduous process end with the final election results not even being officially announced? How could the efforts of political activists, democracy advocates, and others—and, more important, the unexpectedly high level of public interest, participation, and not least voting (often at significant personal risk)—have been so frustrated? And how could international supporters of the Afghan election, including countries considered models of modern democracy, have gone along with suppression of the election results? Although the process superficially seems to have been chaotic, messy, and virtually unexplainable, a contemporary theory describing societies along axes of elite political bargaining, access to economic resources, and violence provides a relevant framework for analysis.

Historically, the means of organized armed violence were under the decentralized control of elite groups, and stability was maintained by intra-elite bargains that gave different groups in the dominant coalition privileged access to economic resources in return for their not engaging in disruptive internecine warfare or criminal violence.

Violence, Intra-Elite Bargaining, and Limited Access Orders

An influential 2009 book assigns a central role to violence in the political-economic evolution of societies. In *Violence and Social Orders*, Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry R. Weingast argue that until very recently in human history, all organized societies (beyond hunter-gatherers and primitive agricultural communities with no structure above the village level) were what they describe as “limited access orders.”⁴ Historically in these orders (also called natural states), the means of organized armed violence were under the decentralized control of elite groups, and stability was maintained by intra-elite bargains that gave different groups in the dominant coalition privileged access to economic resources in return for their not engaging in disruptive internecine warfare or criminal violence. Limited access in the political and economic spheres mutually reinforced each other, as elites had an interest in protecting the rents they were receiving by eschewing violence. Indeed, available evidence suggests that historically, levels of violence in limited access orders, as measured by rates of violent death in the population or the proportion of deaths resulting from homicide, tended to be an order of magnitude lower than in hunter-gatherer or primitive agricultural societies.⁵

North and colleagues posit that throughout most of history, political and economic institutions have evolved along a range of limited access orders, which they categorize as fragile, basic, and mature—though they acknowledge the boundaries between categories are fuzzy:

- A fragile limited access order is characterized by fluidity and instability. The dominant coalition finds it difficult to sustain itself; elite bargains are transactional and short run in nature; leadership tends to be personality based; and shifting elite alignments and outbreaks of violence are common. The organization of the state is rudimentary, and recurring problems of succession, taxation, and division of spoils among the dominant elite coalition have to be repeatedly addressed on a one-time basis, carrying the risk of breakdown.
- A basic limited access order has greater stability and can sustain a more durable state, with a more developed organizational structure. Some of the recurring issues mentioned are addressed in a more institutionalized manner, without constantly reopening bargains. Entrenched authoritarian regimes typically fall in this category. However, the development of elite organizations outside the state is limited. Control over the means of violence may remain incomplete or, if concentrated in the official armed forces, carries the risk of coups; and reversion to fragility is a significant risk.
- A mature limited access order is characterized by durable state institutions and the ability to support long-lived elite organizations outside the state. The rule of law may be more developed, at least as applied to elites. With a more articulated government structure and a richer tapestry of elite organizations, mature limited access orders exhibit greater resilience in the face of shocks. However, the differences between basic and mature limited access orders are mainly in degree, and reversions from the latter to the former are possible and have occurred.

In the nineteenth century, an unprecedented change occurred in Western Europe, the United States, and some other European-settled colonies and former colonies, which successfully transformed themselves from mature limited access orders into representative democracies with free-market economies, commonly referred to as liberal democracies. Termed *open access orders* by North and colleagues, these countries deal with the problem of violence by maintaining state monopoly control over organized armed forces,⁶ but minimize the associated risk of abuse of state power through open access in both political (democracy) and economic (free entry and competition) spheres.⁷

In the framework developed by North and colleagues, three conditions were required historically for a mature limited access order to be able to transition to an open access order. These “doorstep conditions” included (1) civil authorities’ control over the armed forces, (2) rule of law in place for elites, and (3) the emergence of long-lived (perpetual) organizations.⁸ Under such conditions, elite privileges over time spread more widely through the society, until substantial portions of the population benefited from access in both economic and political spheres.⁹ Open access political and economic institutions reinforced each other, imparting stability to open access orders, just as limited political and economic access were mutually reinforcing in limited access orders. Most countries in the world today, however, including those that came into existence with post–World War II decolonization, remain limited access orders.¹⁰ The framework of North and colleagues, with some contemporary country examples, is summarized in table 1.

Table 1. Different Types of Social Orders

Social Order	Possible Examples	Nature and Strength of State	Economic Organizations	Political Organizations	Organized Armed Violence Capacity
Fragile limited access order	Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti	Rudimentary state, subject to transactional politics and subordinate to or captured by armed groups; a serious risk of state breakdown exists.	Economic and political spheres overlap; organizations are rudimentary but are likely to play both political and economic roles—for example, companies may be vehicles for armed political groups to access economic rents.		Capacity for violence is spread across many organizations and groups; military and civilian are not clearly distinguished.
Basic limited access order	USSR, Saudi Arabia, Tanzania 1970s–1990s, Mexico 1940s–1980s	More durable state, with more developed organizational structure, but may be authoritarian; risk of reversion to fragility exists.	All major public and private economic entities are linked with the dominant coalition.	Political organizations are controlled by the state, for example, one-party authoritarian regimes; difficult for opposition to emerge.	Much violence capacity is located within the government, but not necessarily under civilian control; nongovernmental entities have violence capacity as well.
Mature limited access order	Mexico since 1990s, Brazil, South Africa, India, China	Durable, more resilient state with a well-developed organizational structure; social order supports a wider range of elite organizations.	Many private firms exist, but entry into key sectors is restricted, requiring political connections.	More political organizations exist but depend on central permission and cannot challenge the political-economic powers.	Government controls most organizations with violence capacity, but exceptions exist.
Open access order	Western Europe, United States, Canada, Japan	Size of state varies, but state is effective, providing services; state is stable, politically accountable, and supports political and economic open access.	Most economic entities are private; there is free entry to establish companies on a nondiscriminatory basis.	Political organizations can be freely established by anyone and compete through the electoral process.	Civilian authorities control all organized violence capacity.

Source: Adapted from Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis, Steven B. Webb, and Barry R. Weingast, eds., *In the Shadow of Violence: Politics, Economics, and the Problems of Development* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), table 1.1, 14. The country examples are all from this source, but the author has made some changes to the rest of the table, including adding the “Nature and Strength of State” column.

The focus here is not on the dynamics of open access orders or on how some countries have made the transition to an open access order in recent decades (these issues are briefly discussed in box 1). This report instead explores the logic of limited access orders and how this relates to elections in such countries, in particular in Afghanistan in 2014, while also bringing in related literature on the political marketplace, elections and violence, and political parties. Afghanistan fits very well within the definition of a limited access order, and clearly one toward the fragile end of the spectrum. Not only is the state weak, with no monopoly over organized armed violence, but a wide range of economic and financial resources are subject to intra-elite bargaining, with considerable fragility in political arrangements.

A political marketplace exists where the loyalty, allegiance, or at least acquiescence of actors with control over the means of violence can be bought and sold—or, more accurately, rented, since deals tend to be short term in nature and bargains can be and frequently are reopened.

The Political Marketplace and International Interventions

The concept of the political marketplace, developed by Alex de Waal, is consistent with the framework of North and colleagues as applied to fragile limited access orders and sheds additional light on how these systems work, and also on what happens when international interventions interact with local politics.¹¹ De Waal argues that in large parts of Africa (his study region), armed forces and groups may be decentralized and geographically fragmented, or, if they are concentrated in the official armed forces, the ruler and the state apparatus do not have full control over them—or both. As a result, a political marketplace exists where the loyalty, allegiance, or at least acquiescence of actors with control over the means of violence can be bought and sold—or, more accurately, rented, since deals tend to be short term in nature and bargains can be and frequently are reopened.

This marketplace carries a price for loyalty, in the form of access to resources (for example, hydrocarbons, other mineral resources), access to flows of rents (for example, customs revenues, aid), or sometimes outright cash payments. Prices are determined by several factors, including the relative clout and armed power of different groups, their willingness

Box 1. Issues with Applying the Framework of North and Colleagues to the Contemporary World

There are conceptual and empirical issues with applying the violence and social orders framework, intended to explain the historical evolution of countries that became liberal democracies early on, to countries that developed rapidly post-1945 and developing countries in the world today.^a Unlike in the early nineteenth century, existing open access orders can serve as models, at least confirming that such systems are possible. The availability of modern technology means that limited access orders can achieve much higher economic growth rates than in the premodern era, which may well have an impact on their stability. Globalization, multinational firms, and incipient forms of global governance (for example, the UN) also can affect the stability and evolution of limited access orders, for example by enabling the importation or imposition of institutional forms from open access orders or by weakening ties between political elites and their own countries (by providing safe havens for their money and exit options for themselves and their families).

The sequencing of transitions from limited access to open access orders differs across countries and over time. Francis Fukuyama emphasizes that in South Korea, the sequencing of different components of modernization was different from the path taken by modernizing countries in the nineteenth century, with the rule of law coming toward the end of the process, not centuries earlier, as in England.^b In his most recent book, *Political Order and Political Decay*, Fukuyama argues that the sequence of the emergence of the different elements of what he defines as a political order (a state with monopoly control over organized violence, rule of law, and accountability, typically through democratic processes) is important in determining their subsequent evolution.^c He argues, for example, that in countries that built a strong state with a modern bureaucracy before becoming democracies, clientelism and corruption in government were avoided, whereas in countries where this sequencing was reversed, such as the United States and to a lesser extent the United Kingdom, these problems had to be dealt with at a later stage.

There are also questions about the at least implicit belief in the violence and social orders framework that open access orders are here to stay, stable, and not subject to further evolution. The idea that liberal democracy is a final, stable configuration was argued by Fukuyama in *The End of History and the Last Man*.^d But this view has been increasingly questioned and seems untenable as a categorical generalization. It is true that today's liberal democracies have exhibited a high degree of resilience in the face of severe domestic challenges, major wars, and an increasingly dynamic global environment. However, they are undergoing changes and longer-term trends, which may alter them in important ways. For example, the trend of rising inequality of incomes and especially wealth in liberal democracies is argued by some to be a natural if not inevitable trend.^e Combined in the United States with the almost untrammelled scope for wealth to be deployed in politics and elections, these trends could over time affect the dynamics, balance, and potentially even the stability of open access orders.

a. See North, *In the Shadow of Violence*.

b. Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 474–75; see also *Ibid*, chap. 9.

c. Fukuyama, *Political Order and Political Decay* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014).

d. Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

e. See Thomas Picketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

to resort to violence, the resources available to pay for their loyalty, and the skills of the various political and violence entrepreneurs involved in the political marketplace. Prices can adjust as these parameters change, with deals reopened and renegotiated.

Since what is being traded on the political marketplace is the loyalty of those with control over armed violence, the threat of violence and the exercise of violence are an inherent part of the bargaining process. Political actors can and will engage in violence to demonstrate their power and to try to negotiate a better deal with central authorities. Thus the threat of violence, even if not always exercised, invariably underlies these negotiations.

Further, the political marketplace, according to de Waal, may transcend national boundaries. Armed groups and their leaders in neighboring countries may become part of each other's political marketplaces and may start or support an insurgency in a nearby country or help crush one.

Finally, de Waal argues that international peacekeeping interventions (as well as international financial assistance, when delivered in large amounts) distort the political marketplace. By intervening, international military missions change the price of loyalty, either lowering it by supporting and protecting an existing regime or raising it by providing space for local insurgencies (for example, by putting in place a cease-fire that permits a militarily weaker side to consolidate). International money, whether in the form of the expenditures of military forces or of civilian and security aid, becomes a resource that can be utilized to pay off different armed actors, sometimes explicitly, more often through granting implicit access.

Moreover, once international forces, often with large associated financial assistance, become part of the political scene, they may inadvertently retard domestic political consolidation and stability. And the impact on the political marketplace may make it more difficult for an international intervention to end, since there is the risk of the violent reopening of bargaining and political adjustments when the international forces leave.

Thus international military interventions can inadvertently make the situation worse, and may even result in more rather than less violence, especially when they exit the scene. Domestic political dynamics are crucial, but there is no guarantee they will provide a way forward. The "do no harm" principle applies in full force, but it is impossible for international interventions to avoid having some impact on the political marketplace. At the very least, full awareness of and efforts to mitigate distortions are called for.

Elections in Limited Access Orders

For most of history, limited access orders did not involve wide-suffrage elections.¹² In the latter part of the twentieth century, especially after the end of the Cold War, elections came to be seen almost universally as a political legitimation mechanism, to the point that nearly all countries (the vast majority of which are limited access orders) hold elections to validate and legitimize the regime. Elections are seen as a key component of political transitions, as a prerequisite for normalization, and often as a signal that the task of international peacekeeping forces is completed and they can exit.

However, elections superimposed on limited access orders play quite different roles than in functioning democracies (that is, open access orders), and this is all the more true of fragile limited access orders, especially those affected by ongoing or recent conflict.¹³ Several different roles for elections in these countries are evident from experience and are listed below. However, the selection of political leaders and representatives, both individuals and institutionalized political parties with associated policy platforms, through the democratic process generally is not a role of elections in such settings.¹⁴

Elections superimposed on limited access orders play quite different roles than in functioning democracies, and this is all the more true of fragile limited access orders, especially those affected by ongoing or recent conflict.

Elections as a prerequisite for international recognition and legitimacy. The current international system tends to equate elections with democracy, and holding elections is seen as a *sine qua non* for international respectability and even recognition. This is especially true of fragile limited access orders, which often lack the geopolitical clout to resist international pressures to hold elections and which typically are very dependent on international aid and often have a UN peacekeeping mission or other international military forces in-country.

Elections to legitimize an authoritarian ruler and regime. The phenomenon of sham elections, whereby the ruler receives the lion's share of votes, with no or only token opposition, is virtually universal in authoritarian regimes. Significant electoral violence may not occur if the regime is powerful enough to prevent dissent and opposition electoral activity. However, when the regime's hold on power is weak, electoral intimidation and violence may become more open, especially if there is an organized opposition, even if it does not have a realistic prospect of victory.

Elections to ratify an elite consensus. This is arguably what happened in Afghanistan in its 2004 presidential election. The various non-Taliban political elites generally understood that Karzai would be president and that votes for other candidates did not carry any implication that a Karzai victory would not be accepted. Under such circumstances, elections can support or at least not undermine stability. But the key determinant of the outcome is the elite consensus reached within the confines of the limited access order, not the election itself.

Elections to signal the relative strength of different elites through their vote banks. Vote banks are also found in open access orders, where they may be referred to as base voters or the base, but in limited access orders, vote banks are associated with elite political actors and groups that have access to and control over means of armed violence. Where vote banks correspond at least roughly to the relative military strength of elite leaders and groups (and their ability and will to resort to violence), elections could serve as a much less violent means than the battlefield of sorting out their relative strengths. However, there would inevitably be uncertainty about whether vote banks would materialize on election day, and the expectations of different elite actors are likely to deviate from one other, leading to the possibility of miscalculations, with resulting tensions and the risk of violent breakdowns.

Elections as an arena for the continuation of organized violence. Sometimes elections in limited access orders appear to be virtually the continuation of armed conflict by electoral means. Unfortunately, election-related violence is seemingly so entrenched in some countries that it becomes a normal part of the process, candidates routinely threatening or using violence as part of their election strategies. In these situations, election results depend on intimidation, threats of violence, or the actual exercise of violence.

A Clash of Logics

There is an inherent disconnect between democratic elections and the political structure and processes of a fragile limited access order. Elections by their nature have winners and losers, especially elections to select a head of government or state. On the other hand, the intra-elite bargaining that occurs in fragile limited access orders is characterized by give-and-take, shifting alignments, and changes in relative shares and power balances, but not necessarily by clear-cut winners and losers. The clashes between these different political logics are most acute when elections are first introduced and are likely to be seen by the candidates as a zero-sum, one-time game in which any gains to good behavior and cooperation are typically more than offset by the adverse impact of an election loss. Once there have been a number of election cycles involving peaceful transfers of power and changes in leadership, and especially when there are long-lived political groupings (parties) that can look beyond a single election, the calculus of political actors tends to change. Under such circumstances,

There is an inherent disconnect between democratic elections and the political structure and processes of a fragile limited access order.

elections are more likely to be seen as a repeated game in which the winner-takes-all mentality is mitigated by an understanding by both winners and losers that there will be future contests that could reverse the results and that the respective roles of the different parties in power and in opposition could change.

Elections, Democracy, and Violence

There has been much debate about the relationship and sequencing of democracy and development. One focus of this debate has been the relationship between democracy (specifically the holding of elections) on the one hand, and civil war and other forms of violence on the other.

Cross-country quantitative analysis by Paul Collier and associates suggests that in countries with low levels of average per capita income, democracy (as measured by an index that includes holding elections, but also other indicators) tends to be associated with higher levels of violence, whereas in higher-income countries this association is reversed.¹⁵ The point at which democracy shifts from being violence-increasing to violence-reducing occurs at an average per capita income of around \$2,700, according to this analysis. There is also an interesting finding that elections in postconflict transitional situations tend to be associated with a reduced probability of civil war before the election is held but an increased probability after the election. Another finding is that holding elections in the absence of other elements of democracy tends to worsen the prospects for reform. Elections in smaller, ethnically divided societies tend to retard reforms rather than accelerate them.

Moreover, the transition from autocracy to democracy carries high risks of instability and descent into protracted violent conflict, potentially leaving such countries worse off than under the original autocracy but without realistic prospects of moving toward full-fledged democracy in the near term. Such transformations are not quick or easy to achieve and are subject to damaging reversals, as demonstrated most recently by the experience of a number of Arab Spring countries. Thus, even though once democracy has become well established and entrenched in a country, performance in terms of economic growth, pro-development policies, and social outcomes may well improve, during the transition there are higher risks of poor performance, instability, and descent into violent conflict.

Although the results of large-n cross-country quantitative studies need to be interpreted with caution, they do reflect the underlying reality that “democracy in dangerous places” (in Collier’s words) does not necessarily work in the same way or yield the same outcomes as in more developed countries characterized by peace and political stability. Indeed, the introduction of elections in low-income developing countries facing fragility or conflict may be an example of *isomorphic mimicry*, whereby the outward form of an institution is adopted from industrialized liberal democracies but its actual functioning and outcomes are quite different, and the expected benefits do not materialize.¹⁶

In sum, the literature does not provide much support for the widespread assumption, often operationalized in international interventions and transition planning, that merely holding elections in postconflict and conflict-affected countries promotes stability and reduces violence, or that elections in and of themselves enhance prospects for reforms and better development outcomes in such countries.

Political Parties, Postconflict Transitions, Reforms, and Development

If elections alone are not the solution and indeed may be part of the problem in fragile and conflict-affected situations, what might make a positive difference? One approach focuses on political parties as a key institution for peace and stability, reforms, and development.

The literature does not provide much support for the widespread assumption, often operationalized in international interventions and transition planning, that merely holding elections in postconflict and conflict-affected countries promotes stability and reduces violence.

The basic insight underlying this analysis is that the public sector policies and actions that contribute to statebuilding and development progress can be understood as what economists call a collective action problem.¹⁷ Public goods (ranging from peace and security to social and other services provided by a functioning state) benefit a society as a whole, but individuals and firms do not have an incentive to produce them. Reforms and pro-development policies are argued to have public good characteristics, so implementing them requires sustained collective action.¹⁸

Philip Keefer asserts that formalized political parties that hold together over time and pursue policy goals can be a critical vehicle for achieving reforms, development progress, and stability.¹⁹ Political party coherence requires mechanisms that provide incentives for both party leaders and members to avoid free-riding by the latter and the pursuit of personal agendas inconsistent with the party platform by the former. These prerequisites can be satisfied by parties that have a program, a formal structure, and longevity beyond that of an individual leader (even if, as is common, a party started out as the creature of a founding charismatic leader). According to Keefer's analysis, *programmatic* political parties have a policy agenda that is seen as being in the party members' interests, whereas *machine* parties involve targeted, party-mediated transfers and benefits to members and *clientelist* parties rely on individual patron-client relationships and associated transfers and benefits. Political parties in fragile limited access orders are likely to be clientelist, consistent with the political relationships more generally in that kind of regime.

Keefer's empirical analysis finds that the existence of programmatic political parties in a country makes a real difference to the functioning and outcomes of elections and other processes of democracy. Specifically, programmatic political parties in developing countries tend to be associated with better educational outcomes, improved quality of the bureaucracy, less corruption, and less risk of civil war.²⁰ Interestingly, the benefits of programmatic political parties extend to nondemocratic regimes: if the ruler has organized a political party with a programmatic agenda and coherent incentives around that, benefits are reaped even in the absence of competitive elections.

Keefer's findings are complemented and reinforced by qualitative evidence from case studies. An unpublished background paper for the World Bank's *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development* looked at the experience of Cambodia, Mozambique, Rwanda, South Africa, and Vietnam—five countries with different political systems that made a successful transition from conflict to stability and development.²¹ Even though each faced political instability at the outset, in all five countries a dominant political party emerged that was able to reinvent itself as inclusive and resilient by consolidating power through deepened authority, managerial executive capability, privileged patron-client networks, and the effective use of international aid for political consolidation. These countries were characterized by major differences in terms of democracy and competitive elections, but all successfully transitioned away from protracted conflict, not least through political party development.

In Afghanistan, the development of political parties has been stunted. There are numerous small, fragmented, often personality-based parties—neither well organized, effective, and cohesive nor programmatic in any meaningful sense. In addition to the inherent challenges of forming, nurturing, and sustaining programmatic political parties in fragile limited access orders, there are country-specific factors in Afghanistan that further militate against such parties (see box 2).

Box 2. Obstacles to the Development of Political Parties in Afghanistan

First, the country's problematic experience with political parties over the past half century has given parties a very bad reputation with Afghans. The ideological parties of the 1960s and 1970s, the Marxist-Leninist parties that precipitated the country's descent into protracted conflict from 1978 onward, the jihadi parties that developed in opposition to the Soviet occupation, extremist religious movements (most notably the Taliban), and the flawed and weak political parties post-2001 all have arguably been damaging to varying degrees and in different ways.

Second, former President Karzai's well-known antipathy to political parties, and his refusal to support their development during his nearly thirteen years in power, reflect this broader sentiment. His mode of political management—personalized, divisive, and anti-institutionalization—also militated against others' forming effective political parties.

Third, the single nontransferable vote (SNTV) mechanism for parliamentary elections, used in only a tiny handful of other countries in the world, is highly inimical to programmatic political parties.^a This is part of the reason—argued by some to be a very important factor—for the fragmentation and lack of cohesion of the numerous small political parties and groupings in Afghanistan's National Assembly.

And finally, ethnic fragmentation, ethnic tensions exacerbated during the long period of conflict, and tribal, geographic, and other divides make programmatic political party development more difficult. Moreover, ethnic political groupings in Afghanistan tend to be personality-driven rather than having a clear policy agenda (even one driven by ethnic interests).

a. See, among others, Andrew Reynolds, "The Curious Case of Afghanistan," *Journal of Democracy* 17, no. 2 (April 2006): 104–17; "An Evaluation of the SNTV Electoral System in Afghanistan," Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan, October 2011, <http://fefaf.org.af/index.php/report/47-an-evaluation-of-the-sntv-electoral-system-in-afghanistan-overview>.

Understanding Afghanistan's 2014 Election

What insights do these various analyses provide into how the 2014 presidential election played out in Afghanistan? First, the inherent inconsistency between electoral processes—which by their nature have a winner and a loser—and the intra-elite bargaining characteristic of fragile limited access orders was clearly in evidence during the 2014 presidential election. The side that was initially declared the loser in the second round felt it had far too much to lose to let the result go unchallenged, and therefore engaged in accusations of fraud, brinkmanship, and hard bargaining that to a considerable extent offset the adverse impact of the prospective election loss. Particularly since it occurred at a crucial time in Afghanistan's transition, this election was viewed as a make-or-break event, and the idea of waiting until the next presidential election five years later was a nonstarter for the Abdullah camp.²²

Second, postvoting violence was threatened and by many accounts was a real risk, at the extreme extending to the possibility of some kind of soft coup and the formation of a parallel government.²³ Thus the association between elections and the risk of violence in low-income countries facing conflict or fragility was clearly illustrated, even though substantial violence did not materialize in the end.

Why not? Under the threat of violence the prospective election outcome was, while not superseded, managed in a way that the losing side did not lose too much. This was accomplished through the initial agreement to form a national unity government, followed by intensive behind-the-scenes bargaining between the two sides to hammer out what that agreement would mean in terms of appointments of ministers and other senior positions. This is reminiscent of the intra-elite bargaining in fragile limited access orders, whereby economic privileges are divided to provide incentives for actors with access to organized armed violence not to engage in conflict over spoils.²⁴ Although the unity government agreement included some very positive statements about reforms, the hard bargaining that occurred was over the allocation of ministerial appointments and other top government positions, and over the

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roles and powers of the newly created CEO position. As a result, election-related violence was avoided in Afghanistan in 2014, but only by superimposing on the election a nontransparent bargaining process between the two candidates and their camps, which resembled far more what occurs in a fragile limited access order than in a normal democratic electoral process.²⁵

Third, Afghanistan's experience in the latter stages of the 2014 presidential election well illustrates the workings of the political marketplace as conceptualized by de Waal, and how well-meaning international interventions can change the price of loyalty, with potentially profound effects. The U.S.-led and UN-mediated intervention to prevent a breakdown essentially gave both sides that had participated in the run-off election relatively equal bargaining power in the subsequent negotiations over the formation of a national unity government. This arguably raised sharply the price that had to be paid by the Ghani team for the acquiescence of the Abdullah team to Ghani's becoming president. Not only the new CEO position but also the promise to hold a *loya jirga* (a grand national assembly with authority to amend Afghanistan's constitution) within two years to make that position constitutional, as well as the agreement to allocate ministerial and other top leadership positions "equitably" between the two teams, represented a steep price to pay for loyalty. Moreover, the new CEO position (complete with two deputy CEOs, filled by the two vice presidential candidates on Abdullah's ticket) undermined the constitutional vice presidents on Ghani's ticket (Dostum and Sarwar Danesh), and Ahmad Zia Massoud, who had been promised a supraministerial position in the Ghani cabinet in return for his endorsement prior to the second round. The sheer number of top positions in addition to the president—two vice presidents, CEO, two deputy CEOs, and Massoud—may well have reduced the importance of each of them.

A simple thought experiment can provide an indication of the magnitude of the international intervention's impact. If the initial results of the second round of voting had shown a one million vote lead for Abdullah's ticket, the process would have played out quite differently and far more quickly. Ghani, based on his own public comments before the election, would have accepted defeat and gone into opposition, possibly running for parliament in 2015. Some of his supporters probably would have joined him in opposition, others would have made deals with the Abdullah camp, and overall a realignment would have occurred, but with Abdullah's camp clearly in the driver's seat in allocating positions and consolidating the new administration. Even if it had wanted to, the Ghani team would not have been favorably positioned to use a credible threat of violence to improve its bargaining position.²⁶ And the United States and other international actors would not have intervened, at least not in such a heavy-handed way.

It would be unrealistic to expect a completely symmetrical result in the situation that actually materialized (Ghani ahead by one million votes in the preliminary results, and the other side having much greater access to the means of organized armed violence). However, while the international intervention could have been just as heavy-handed as it was in pressuring both sides to eschew violence (and threatening withdrawal of international support if violence was resorted to, let alone if a parallel government was formed or if the Afghan National Security Forces got involved), the losing side should not have been given what in effect became a veto power in the subsequent bargaining. The international intervention also could have more clearly supported the electoral process, however flawed, by not being as dismissive of the postelection audit. And certainly announcement of the final election results should not have been subject to negotiation.²⁷

That the international intervention did not take such a form may owe in part to extreme short-termism in focusing entirely on immediate stability without taking into account possible adverse consequences of the political deal in coming months and years. Short-run risk aversion on the part of the U.S. government, and the overarching priority to end the U.S. combat mission smoothly and on a positive note, also may have played a role.

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However, the logic of the political marketplace suggests that the international intervention in the 2014 election will continue to have distortionary effects, and that further interventions to maintain some kind of political balance and stability may well be needed again in the future. So what may have been perceived as a one-off intervention that was crucial to the United States' exit strategy may on the contrary prolong the necessity of U.S. hands-on engagement in political management in Afghanistan. This would not only retard domestic political development, it may also weaken the United States' hand in advocating for and trying to incentivize serious reforms, such as anticorruption efforts.

The denouement of the Afghan presidential election also reflects the lack of organized, programmatic political parties in the country. The two leading candidates did not differ much in their announced policy agendas, so voters' choices tended not to be based on policy differences. The second round in particular was characterized by ethnic mobilization and contestation over the reins and to some extent the spoils of power. More fundamentally, even though the national unity government has enunciated a general program, in the absence of meaningful political parties, it is unclear how the collective action required to implement a reform program can be mobilized and sustained over time.

Finally, why was it so important that the final, post-audit election results not be announced? The alleged massive fraud (argued by some to be impossible to fully detect through any audit because it was so sophisticated) was the ostensible reason, along with the argument that releasing the results would have risked a violent reaction by Abdullah supporters and associated power-holders (recalling the omnipresent threat of violence in a fragile limited access order).²⁸ But another reason may have been that releasing officially certified results would have exposed the gap between the post-audit electoral outcome and the self-perceived vote banks of individuals and elite groups on the losing side. Not only did this discrepancy apply to Abdullah's camp more generally, but the endorsements he received after the first round, mostly from candidates who did not make the run-off, also did not bring many, if any, votes along with them in the second round.

Hence, releasing the final election results would have undermined the bargaining position of those whose vote banks did not materialize, and possibly also raised doubts about their political legitimacy. Moreover, officially making public the final election results might well have strengthened the hand of the winner (no matter how equal the nominal division of powers) within the unity government. Whatever the reasons, the lack of transparency regarding the final result, and the connivance of the international community in not revealing the results of an election in which it had invested much political capital and hundreds of millions of dollars, certainly sent mixed messages to the Afghan people and most likely undermined the legitimacy of and popular participation in future Afghan elections.

Lessons and Implications

The 2014 Afghan presidential election provides a sobering reminder of how difficult it is for meaningful democracy to emerge and develop in a situation such as that faced by Afghanistan. The problematic aspects of elections in such contexts came to the fore, even after voting successfully occurred in both the first and second rounds. Unlearned lessons from past experience need to be relearned, expectations kept modest, and the "do no harm" principle taken to heart. Nothing can substitute for nationally led political development and the formation of robust political institutions, which inevitably will take time.

One lesson that should not be drawn from this experience is that the Afghan people somehow are not ready for democracy, and that byzantine processes of elite bargaining and division of spoils are inevitable. Such a conclusion would do gross disservice to the millions of

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Afghans who voted in good faith, the civil society activists, thousands of national observers, and others, such as the professionals in the electoral institutions who planned and delivered the elections. Democracy does not spring full-blown from good intentions, paper constitutions, and extensive financial and technical support from outside. Developing the institutions and habits necessary for democracy to work takes time. There has been much progress in Afghanistan since 2001, through multiple *loya jirgas*, two full election cycles, and the most recent third presidential election. A majority of Afghan adults now know nothing other than elections as the mechanism for choosing—or at least validating the legitimacy of—their political leaders and representatives.

Lesson 1: Elite Attitudes and Political Practices Persist

While much of the Afghan population may be ready for electoral democracy, the same is not true of the political elites who emerged during the 1980s and 1990s on the battlefield against the Soviet occupation (and often fighting each other), developed in the hothouse of resistance politics in Pakistan, and have become entrenched since 2001. Many of these elites continue to have access to the means of organized armed violence, which forms part of their power base. The 2014 experience shows that despite the considerable political development that has occurred from the bottom up, large parts of the political elite and their practices have not changed so much.

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Lesson 2: Underlying Political Incentives Overwhelm the Mechanics of Holding Elections

The 2014 experience also demonstrates that the mechanics of holding elections, and the manifest imperfections in the accuracy and integrity of the electoral process in 2014, are only part of the story. In the Afghan context, more reliable and trustworthy vote counts will not fundamentally alter the ability and incentives of various political actors to threaten or use violence in bargaining to seek better political outcomes for themselves and their groups.²⁹ This is not surprising, since there is an inherent disconnect between democratic processes such as elections and the political logic of a limited access order, which involves the use or threat of armed violence as a means of achieving political and financial gains.

Lesson 3: Long-Lived Political Institutions Are Needed

Elections in the absence of credible, long-lived political parties are unlikely to achieve the benefits expected of democratization. While it will not be easy, much stronger efforts are needed to promote the development of meaningful political parties, including through changing the disincentives stemming from the single nontransferable vote mechanism. Fortunately, SNTV is not enshrined in Afghanistan's constitution but is part of the electoral law, which can be changed through the legislative process.

Lesson 4: The International Community Must Avoid Inadvertently Doing Harm

The election of 2014 was the second Afghan presidential election in which the international community intervened heavily, with mixed and potentially problematic results.³⁰ The new political arrangement, whatever its short-term benefits, has created problems for the future and may well weaken the government's ability to implement meaningful reforms that adversely affect entrenched interest groups and power-holders. The international community should weigh carefully the costs and risks of political interventions in sensitive processes such as the 2014 election and, when intervening, should consider how to minimize harms and distortions arising from its interventions.

The international community nevertheless can cautiously provide incentives for and reinforce dynamics promoting better state performance and the development of political institutions beyond elections. There needs to be less focus on holding elections per se, and much more on developing viable political institutions. This takes a long time but, as demonstrated by international experience, will enable elections and democracy to fulfill their potential and achieve positive development and other outcomes. However, the internal political dynamics and evolution will be crucial, and external interventions cannot substitute for that.

Lesson 5: Avoid Combining Elections Temporally with Other Major Turning Points

Finally, elections should not be made even more difficult and risky by combining them with other major turning points. Completing the drawdown of international combat troops and transfer of full combat responsibilities to the Afghan National Security Forces in the same year that Afghanistan's 2014 presidential election was held exacerbated the pressures on both. This election would have posed major challenges even under better circumstances, and it borders on irresponsibility to combine elections with other major, potentially disruptive changes at the same time. The tendency to view elections as a marker for completion of an international intervention in a conflict-affected country like Afghanistan, or worse, as a signal that it is time to withdraw international military forces, let alone other forms of support, must be avoided.

Conclusion

The way Afghanistan's 2014 presidential election played out is a good example of the contradictions, clashes, and perverse effects that can arise when democratic institutional forms such as elections are superimposed on a limited access order, especially a fragile one, where decentralized control over the means of organized armed violence means that elite bargains are what keeps the peace and maintains a modicum of political stability. Elections, with their inevitable winners and losers, can be destabilizing under such conditions. In the contemporary global environment, not holding elections is not a viable option in most countries. However, outcomes can be improved by better understanding the inherent problems associated with elections in countries facing fragile and conflict-affected situations, by factoring in lessons learned to mitigate these problems, by holding to modest expectations and not combining elections with other major turning points that compound risks, and by focusing on longer-term political development rather than only on each individual election.

Notes

1. For a detailed account of the presidential election, see International Crisis Group, "Afghanistan's Political Transition," Asia Report no. 260 (ICG, October 16, 2014), www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-asia/afghanistan/260-afghanistan-s-political-transition.aspx; see also Democracy International, "Afghanistan Election Observation Mission 2014—Report," (Bethesda, MD: Democracy International, January 2015), <http://democracyinternational.com/publications/afghanistan-election-observation-mission-2014-report>.
2. The preliminary vote totals reported by the IEC were 4,485,888 (56.44 percent) for Ghani and 3,461,639 (43.56 percent) for Abdullah, <http://www.iec.org.af/results/en/runoff>.
3. In light of the large vote gap between the two candidates in the second round preliminary tally, and also because there undoubtedly was fraud in favor of both candidates, there would have had to be anywhere from two million (if one-fourth of the fraud favored Abdullah) to three million (if one-third of the fraud favored him) fraudulent votes for the election outcome to be reversed. So in the range of 25 to 40 percent of the eight million votes initially recorded would have had to be fraudulent for Abdullah to be the actual winner. However, as noted in the Democracy International report, "Afghanistan Election Observation Mission 2014", 41: "The audit was imperfect, but the process revealed that it was much harder to find evidence of fraud in this election compared to previous elections. The serious allegations of widespread fraud from both candidates remain unsubstantiated."
4. Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry R. Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

ISBN: 978-1-60127-296-6

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5. This evidence is presented in Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking, 2011), chap. 2.
6. State control over organized armed forces is a central element of the classic Weberian state.
7. The distinction between limited access orders and open access orders is similar to that between “extractive institutions” and “inclusive institutions” in the framework advanced by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson in their book, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (New York: Random House, 2012). In their framework, however, the dynamics of political-economic evolution are based on social conflict between elites and nonelites, whereas in North and colleagues’ framework the focus is on intra-elite contestation.
8. Such organizations included limited liability business corporations as well as civil, philanthropic, and religious organizations.
9. Manifestations of greater economic and political access included the free establishment of businesses and their entry into the marketplace (as opposed to earlier restricted issuance of charters by the government) and elections based on increasingly widespread suffrage (moving toward universal male suffrage and then belatedly including women).
10. The empires created by European countries during the nineteenth century, when the most prominent among them were themselves becoming open access orders, created new limited access orders or built on existing ones throughout the world. Subsequently, post-World War II decolonization resulted in the creation of numerous new countries, the vast majority of them limited access orders.
11. See Alex de Waal, “Mission Without End? Peacekeeping in the African Political Marketplace,” *International Affairs* 85, no. 1 (January 2009): 99–113.
12. In the rare cases in which elections were held, only a small proportion of the male population typically was eligible to vote, with some form of property or wealth ownership as the most common eligibility criterion.
13. The World Bank compiles a list of countries characterized as facing fragile or conflict-affected situations. See <http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/FY15%20Fragile%20states%20list.pdf>.
14. See North et al., *In the Shadow of Violence*, 341.
15. Paul Collier summarizes for the general reader the findings of research on elections and violence conducted by him and associates. See Paul Collier, *Wars, Guns, and Votes: Democracy in Dangerous Places* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).
16. See Lant Pritchett and Frauke de Weijer, “Fragile States: Stuck in a Capability Trap?,” background paper for the World Bank’s *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security, and Development* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2010).
17. The need for collective action to produce and preserve public goods, and the obstacles to collective action, were set forth by Mancur Olson in *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), generating a large literature and numerous applications.
18. See Philip Keefer, “Collective Action, Political Parties and Pro-Development Public Policy,” World Bank Policy Research working paper 5676 (Washington, DC: World Bank, June 2011), and David Booth, *Development as a Collective Action Problem: Addressing the Real Challenges of African Governance* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2012), among others.
19. See Philip Keefer, “Organizing for Prosperity: Collective Action, Political Parties and the Political Economy of Development,” World Bank Policy Research working paper 6583 (Washington, DC: World Bank, August 2013).
20. *Ibid.*, 18–20.
21. The findings of this paper have been summarized in Richard Hogg, Claudia Nassif, Camilo Gomez Orsorio, William Byrd, and Andrew Beath, *Afghanistan in Transition: Looking Beyond 2014* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2013), 41.
22. Abdullah had come in second in the first round of the 2009 presidential election, and then bowed out of the second round, gifting that election to Karzai. So from his standpoint, not getting anything out of the 2014 election would have meant waiting a full decade, with uncertain prospects that he would be a viable and realistic presidential candidate in 2019.
23. The prevalence of dispute resolution in Afghanistan by violence or threat thereof, and that this occurred during the 2014 presidential election, is noted by Thomas Ruttig, among others (<https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/elections-50-experience-with-governments-of-national-unity-elsewhere/>).
24. Afghan elites were accustomed to this kind of intra-elite bargaining from the jihadi politics of the 1980s and 1990s, as well as from President Karzai’s political management during his nearly thirteen years at the helm of leadership.
25. As noted in a Democracy International report, “A peaceful transfer of power did occur, but the process that led to it was not democratic” (Afghanistan Election Observation Mission 2014, 47).
26. Although some Ghani supporters do command militias, there is nothing like the access Abdullah’s supporters have to armed forces, including networks in the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).
27. Rather than adopting a principle of transparency and releasing the audit’s results, parts of the international community condemned it in the press, the European Union calling the audit process “unsatisfactory,” http://www.eucom.eu/files/pressreleases/english/eueat-afghanistan-press-release-21092014_en.pdf.
28. As my colleague Scott Smith has pointed out, it is contradictory to argue both that fraud was massive and that it was so sophisticated as to be undetectable through audit, for in that case, how could anyone know whether the fraud was indeed massive?
29. Indeed, there are signs that electoral reforms may degenerate into a struggle for control over Afghanistan’s electoral institutions, that is, to “capture” them so as to increase the probability of victory in future elections. See Martine van Bijlert, “Electoral Reform, or Rather: Who Will Control Afghanistan’s Next Election?” Afghanistan Analysts Network, February 17, 2015, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/electoral-reform-or-rather-who-will-control-afghanistans-next-election/>.
30. A partial audit supervised by the UN was conducted in 2009 to address fraud allegations, and there was controversy as to whether a second round was necessary.



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