

Elite Pluralism and Instability in Afghanistan

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Abstract

Afghanistan's political landscape is defined by a multiethnic and competitive elite structure. Rival factions comprising tribal leaders, warlords, and political figures exploit ethnic identity and state institutions not for nation-building but to consolidate their own power and undermine adversaries. This paper analyses how elite pluralism and instrumentalism have contributed to Afghanistan's persistent instability, and why successive regimes have failed to establish a cohesive and inclusive state. Drawing on elite theory, instrumentalism, and constructivism as its theoretical framework, the research qualitatively examines the prevalence of instrumentalism across different regimes, from the post-2001 Republic to the re-establishment of the Taliban emirate in Afghanistan. It examines how elites in the Karzai and Ghani administrations utilised patronage networks and ethnic mobilisation to hinder the development of a unified national identity, thereby rendering the state ineffective and vulnerable to corruption. It further finds that the Pashtun-dominated Taliban elite employs a different but equally exclusionary form of instrumentalism, utilising a singular religious narrative to suppress pluralism and centralise authority. The study finds that Afghanistan's anarchy is not merely a failure of state-building, but a condition reproduced by elite competition, generating protracted social conflict. To achieve positive peace, incentives for elite must change away from divisive instrumentalism to inclusive political settlement under inclusive doctrine.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Afghan Elite, Constructivism, Anarchy, Elite Instrumentalism, Protracted Conflict.

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Introduction

Afghanistan is in a perpetual state of unrest, emerging from lawlessness and civil war over the decades. This instability and turmoil cannot be solely attributed to the external meddling or ever consistent geopolitical rivalries in the region. It would be prudent to suggest that beside the external influences, Afghan environments have predominantly been shaped by the internal dynamics. Essentially, Afghanistan's tumultuous history has been marred by the intrigues of its pluralist elite — a complex web of powerful individuals and groups vying for control. This struggle for dominance has led to instability, culminating in anarchy and civil war that have ravaged the country. The ongoing chaos is a product of an elite power struggle where tribal, religious, cultural, and societal lines have been re-exploited to gain power by varying elite groups. Afghan anarchy truly depicts Alexander Wendt's constructivism, "Anarchy is what states make of it."¹

The power contest among Afghan elites and resultant intrigues during internal strife for dominance is imbedded in the history of this country. The foundations of intra-Afghan rivalries commenced with the inception of state and continued thereafter. This account of Afghan elite unfolds with the consolidation of power by Abdali as royalist,² followed by communist and later by tribal religious clergy. Throughout the existence of modern Afghanistan, the internal dynamics of the country have been influenced by a small but very powerful elite groups.³ Despite being in minority, these elites enjoy substantial influence and decide the future of the majority. While decisive influence by dominant interest groups on any state can be termed as a common phenomenon, however, in case of Afghanistan, it has led to perpetual instability. Prior to exploring various dimensions of Afghan political elite from all ethnic groups, it is imperative to understand the elite theory and how it affects individuals, groups and society at large.

This paper focuses on various dimensions of Afghan elite instrumentalism

¹ Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 391–425.

² Thomas Jefferson Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, Second edition (Princeton University Press, 2023).

³ Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 19–25.

leading to social constructivism of the masses. Afghan elite instrumentalism refers to the systematic practice by which political elites in Afghanistan manipulate state institutions, ethnic identities and patronage networks. The historical sway of these elites over Afghan political landscape has shaped a peculiar social construct in the country. Afghan masses are, therefore, immune to this construct and have seldom raised an opposing view. It endeavours to underline the role of Afghan elites in the state's instability and frequent breakdown of statehood since the death of Taimur Shah in 1793.⁴ Afghanistan has emerged as an independent state under the leadership of Abdali Pashtuns, an elite entity that continued to dominate the political dynamics of the country since then. The formulation of Afghan elites did not stay confined to the founder Abdalis only but proliferated to other socio-ethnic groups as well. Each of these elite groups wanted lion's share in power and even collaborated with external players for enhancing their relative strength. Afghan elites not only rivaled each other but had a significant role in shaping social culture, ethnic influences and strategic priorities of the state. Meanwhile, the Afghan elites continue to blame external forces for the country's chaos, and strategic scapegoating to mask internal instability and governance failures. Domestically, elites have hardly made any worthwhile endeavour to address the root causes of perpetual instability in the country. Presumably, 'looking inward' might have been viewed against the interests of these powerful Afghan cliques. While numerous studies evaluate the influence of external meddling on country's strategic culture, however, role of Afghan elites needs further exploration. Consequently, the main argument of this paper revolves around exploring various facets of Afghan strategic culture, crafted by the 'pluralist elite.'⁵

Theoretical Framework

Elite theory elaborate that power is concentrated in the hands of a few

⁴ Fayz Muḥammad Kātib Hazārah, *The History of Afghanistan: Fayz Muḥammad Kātib Hazārah's Sirāj Al-Tawārīkh*, trans. and ann. R. D. McChesney and M. M. Khorrami (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 70–71.

⁵ A "pluralist elite" refers to a complex political concept where power is *dispersed among competing elites*, rather than being held by one single ruling class (as in pure elitism) or being fully democratised (as in pure pluralism); it suggests that while many groups (elites) vie for power, some systemic factors or disproportionate influence still shape policy, often favouring business or established interests, challenging classical pluralist ideas that power is broadly shared through interest groups.

members of higher class known as elite who possess superior means and resources than the general public.⁶ Decision-making process of most important domains of economy, social, political, education and media rests with this significant class. Applying the elite theory to environments in Afghanistan leads to the inference that different varieties of Afghan social and tribal elite traditionally exercise power and enforce decisions to safeguard the interest of ruling minority.

Above discussion infers that influential people from diverse walks of enterprises such as investment, legislation, science, corporate and security, plan to create a network of power and influence. These elite initialise a system of intertwining boards, comprising clusters of persons in positions of control over various social and economic organisations.⁷ They are not chosen through electoral process but yield, imposing authority and influence in society. Plato was the earliest known person to articulate the source of elitist philosophy, postulating that the ideal form of governance consisted of philosopher King⁸ and a guardian class with a high degree of ethics, values and knowledge. Basic notion rests on the argument that a small group with higher intellectual, moral and ethical standards is more suited to make decisions for entire society. The idea of *Numberdars in Punjab*, *Sardars in Balochistan*, *Wadairas in Sindh* and *Maliks in KPK* are reflections of the same concept. Essentially, on behalf of the rulers, these people, in their respective constituencies or areas of influence, manage day-to-day affairs. The *Numberdars*, *Sardars* and *Wadairas* enjoyed the status of elites and played an influential part in shaping the social construct during British rule in the Subcontinent. Numerous famous theorists over the years have underlined this elitist notions of leadership, from theologian Thomas

⁶ John Higley, "Elites," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, last modified December 11, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/elite-sociology> ; and Shamus Khan, Dominic Walker, and Estela Diaz, "Elites," *Oxford Bibliographies*, last reviewed March 7, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/elite-sociology>.

⁷ Michael Patrick Allen, "The Structure of Interorganisational Elite Cooptation: Interlocking Corporate Directorates," *American Sociological Review* 39, no. 3 (1974): 393–406,

⁸ Plato and Melissa Lane, *The Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee (Penguin Classics, 2007).

Aquinas⁹ in the 13th century to novelist John Milton in the 17th century.¹⁰

In addition, the elitist thesis was strengthened in the 19th century by the contributions of Italian economic and social philosophers Vilfredo Pareto,¹¹ Gaetano Mosca,¹² and Robert Michels.¹³ The writings of these three philosophers are often referred as the Italian school of Elitism. Pareto explained in detail how people may become an elite from non-elite origins by identifying the psychosomatic and intellectual characteristics of the elite as magnificent ones. Mosca emphasised social and personal qualities that enable a person to assume and maintain elite rank.

Influence of Elite Pluralism on Afghan Strategic Culture

Elite pluralism¹⁴ is a political theory that acknowledges the existence of powerful elites in society, but holds that these elites do not constitute one unified ruling class. Instead, they represent a variety of interests and must compete with each other for power, influence, and popular support. Pluralists' view differs from nature and character where interests rule supreme, transforming due to fluid nature of power elite in presence of opposition. The opposing forces are characterised by the manifestation of several interest groups in political arena. Their structure, composition and objectives keep changing leading to destabilising hierarchy of power. Elitist vision was represented by authors such as Mills¹⁵ and Hunter, while the group theory for pursuing interests by specific cliques, was refined by

⁹ Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas, Vol. 1. The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal (The Catholic University of America Press, 2005).

¹⁰ Don Marion Wolfe, *Complete Prose Works of John Milton* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953).

¹¹ Vilfredo Pareto et al., *The Mind and Society (1935) Volume 4* (n.d.).

¹² Britannica Editors, "Gaetano Mosca," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 4, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gaetano-Mosca>.

¹³ Robert Michels and Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchial Tendencies of Modern Democracy*, trans. Eden Paul and Cedar Paul (Free Press, 1968).

¹⁴ Robert A. Dahl, *A Preface to Democratic Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 132–34

¹⁵ Charles Wright Mills and Irving Louis Horowitz, *Power, Politics and People. The Collected Essays of C. Wright Mills. Edited and with an Introduction by Irving Louis Horowitz.[With a Portrait and a Bibliography]*. (Oxford University Press, 1963).

Robert A. Dahl¹⁶ with more pluralist-elitist version. In Dahl's argument, interest groups are perceived as various centres of power, depicting elites with multiple constructs as well as orientations. Afghan elites likewise reflect their diverse social, ethnic, religious as well as geographical backgrounds that shape inter-elite rivalries despite commonality of interests. Consequently, these groups are in constant state of competition with each other and keep hurting interest of other groups while trying to increase their influence on decision making process. The coexistence of various elite groups thus, leads to a political environment where power is not confined to one odd group but distributed among many. This elite pluralism generates debate where elites attempt to answer the question, 'who governs and "who benefits from power?" Power needs to be evaluated through the prism of criticism and group theory exploring invisible dimensions of society.

Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) and Max Weber (1864–1920) are two prominent philosophers who extensively wrote about social and political thought. Ibn Khaldun, frequently referred to as "father of sociology" in the Islamic realm, composed his inspiring work, *Al Muqaddimah*, in the 14th century. He reiterates that the politically, socially and internally cohesive interest group may not be a permanent class but a cyclical product of social solidarity and historical forces. The reference of 'Asabiyah' in *Al Muqaddimah* reflects the socio-political capital and harmony that solidifies a group.¹⁷ This solidified group of earlier political thought is at the cost of weakening others, essentially similar to interplay of modern day elites and masses. The elite's main job is to create and keep the state or dynasty going. They control power and money by taxing people and bagging spoils. Weber formulated his theories during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a period characterised by industrialisation and rationalisation in Europe. Weber offers a linear, structural framework of modernisation, positing that societies progress towards rational-legal authority and bureaucratic organisation.¹⁸ Both examined power, authority, social change, and the

¹⁶ Robert Alan Dahl, *Polyarchy; Participation and Opposition*, (Yale University Press, 1971).

¹⁷ Ibn Khaldūn et al., *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, First Princeton Classics edition, Bollingen Series (Princeton University Press, 2015).

¹⁸ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, vol. 2 (University of California press, 1978).

emergence and decline (or transformation) of societies/states, yet from distinct historical, cultural, and methodological perspectives.

The theoretical dimensions of the elite pluralism can adequately be linked with the Afghan social construct, which is nearly a constant in the country since antiquity. Afghan society comprises of elite with divergent interest and priorities, where elite pluralism has led to anarchy and civil war. Since the inception of Afghanistan as a state, it has been victim of protracted social conflict emerging out of fissiparous tendencies existent among various groups. Pluralist elite of Afghan comprises of tribal factions, warlords, religious and ethnic groups (Pustuns as well as non-Pushtuns) stemming out of power vacuum. Turbulent situation in Afghanistan rests deeply on internal frictions, power struggle and personal interests. This social tendency in Afghanistan has continued unabated during various phases of its history, regardless of nearly catastrophic changes in the governance.

The vicious cycle of infighting and fragmentation defies unity and positive peace, giving birth to social depletion of ethics and values. Afghanistan had been balkanised where ethnic groups exercise power over various regions as de facto autonomous entities. This fragmentation has created fertile breeding ground for extremism as groups like Taliban and ISIS have exploited these divisions to further their own agendas.¹⁹ Each power house has unique dynamics based on its group interest which are often in contradiction with other groups, contrary to national progression and development. Protracted social, religious, sectarian, ethnic and cultural variances are further exploited by foreign hands that widen these crevices. Taliban also assumed power, exploiting these grievances and mistrust.

Prevalent Afghan strategic culture is shaped by the elite pluralism, which focuses on propagating external interferences for all domestic issues, while attempting to divert attention from their damaging role. This strategic culture offers cover to follies of elite through blame game on external factors. The strategic culture of Afghanistan is shaped by its unique history, geography and cultural heritage.²⁰ Afghanistan strategic culture is characterised by a complex mix of tribalism, religiousism and nationalism which has influenced

¹⁹ Aaron Y. Zelin and Ilana Winter, "One Year of the Islamic State Worldwide Activity Map," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 20, 2024.

²⁰ Colin S. Gray, "Out of the Wilderness: Prime Time for Strategic Culture," *Comparative Strategy* 26, no. 1 (2007): 1–20.

country's approach towards security, defence and foreign policy.

The nation possesses a significant historical contest of Islamic movements that have influenced security and defence strategies. The notion of jihad, often referred to as holy war has served to galvanise opposition to foreign occupants and to justify the application of force against identified adversaries. Strategic culture of Afghanistan has considerable implications for its security and different strategies. The focus on independence and self-reliance has resulted in pronounced preference of military self-sufficiency.

Elite Instrumentalism and Protracted Social Conflict

Instrumentalist theories regarding ethno-nationalism suggest that the notion of collective identities is often instigated deliberately for pursuing political, economic, as well as social interests.²¹ Cohen developed one of the earliest instrumentalist approaches, viewing ethnic groups as interest groups organised to pursue collective advantages.²² Instrumentalism asserts that social identities, institutions, and cultural practices are employed solely as tools to sustain as well as manage the acquired socio-political powers. The elite manipulates identities, institutions, and cultural practices to advance their own agendas. Identities are systematically constructed and employed to reinforce the authority of the elite. The institution functions as a vital mechanism for maintaining elite interests and sustaining power. The instrumentalist view of ethnicity and nationalism regards these concepts as mechanisms employed by elites to achieve specific political, territorial, and economic goals. Afghanistan is home to various ethnic groups, each possessing unique elite interests, and has suffered from persistent social conflicts stemming from communal tensions, further intensified by external influences.

Paul Brass explains his concept further by suggesting that the influence of elite policies results in exacerbating ethnic polarisation and altering them into fervent pursuits.²³ The formation and mobilisation of ethnic groups

²¹ Paul Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Theory and Comparison* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1991), 18–25.

²² Abner Cohen, *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa: A Study of Hausa Migrants in Yoruba Towns* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 1–15.

²³ Brass, *Ethnicity*.

within a multi-ethnic society, alongside the influence of the political landscape on ethnic distinctions, are significantly impacted by the competitive dynamics among ethno-political leaders. Azar analyses the conditions under which the presence of any or all of the following four preconditions — “communal content, deprivation of human needs, governance and the state’s role, and international linkages” — may lead to violent conflict, potentially lasting for an extended period within a society.²⁴

A substantial body of knowledge on primordialism and societal constructivism elaborates how people unite around a common platform or within a collective entity. It has been identified that individuals of the same ethnicity come together to express their common concerns, advocating for the recognition of their ethnic needs and demands. Instrumentalism establishes connection between the roles of ethno-political elites and wants of the ethnic group. Elites invoke ethnicity to mobilise individuals in order to safeguard their interests and meet security needs, facilitating access to shared resources and ensuring economic and political representation. Stefan Wolff articulates the singularities (unique characteristics or root causes of ethnic conflict) via two distinct schools of thoughts: i. Primordialism and ii. Instrumentalism.²⁵

Primordialism refers to the notion that ethnic identities are inherent and immutable.²⁶ It lends credence to the idea that people are born with a predetermined ethnicity that cannot be changed by external forces or events in the past. An individual’s linguistic and cultural inheritance is a direct result of their family tree, which in turn establishes a bond between the individual and their society.

Pashtun primordialism has acquired notable significance within the Afghan political landscape, as Pashtuns perceive themselves as the rightful rulers, holding a position of superiority over other ethnic groups in Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a nation characterised by its ethnic and

²⁴ Edward E. Azar et al., “Protracted Social Conflict; Theory and Practice in the Middle East,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 8, no. 1 (1978): 41–60, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2536101>.

²⁵ Stefan Wolff, ed., *Theories of Ethnic Conflict Management*, Ethnic Conflict / Edited by Stefan Wolff 3 (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019).

²⁶ Stephen Cornell and Douglas Hartmann, *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2007), 44–48

religious conservatism, which presents significant challenges in the pursuit of democratic institutions. Generally, the presence of religious and ethnic factors inside civic structure of multi-ethnic and religious nations can easily lead to internal conflict.²⁷

Primordialism is understood through a multitude of interpretations. Sandra Joireman delineates four distinct categories of primordialism: linguistic, cultural, biological, and soft primordialism.²⁸ She characterises biological primordialism as an inherent aspect of nature, something that emerges from the fundamental biological essence. She articulates, “Sociobiologists assert that ethnic identification and ethnic conflict are ubiquitous realities, observed in both the animal kingdom and human societies, positing that the inclination to prioritise close kin groups is rooted in genetics for both humans and animals.”²⁹ Afghan society can be a near perfect example of this phenomenon as various ethnicities continue to preserve their socio-ethnic identities. This biological primordialism has not been limited to Pashtuns alone, but followed by all Afghan ethnicities. While the phenomenon reflects the approach of every Afghan ethnicity as a whole, it also helps the elites of each community to exploit the tendency in their interests. Hence, primordialism can be viewed as another matrix that supports the role of elite pluralism.

Ethnic Polarisation – A Raison d’etat of Afghan Elite Pluralism

The evaluation of ethnicity and ethnic conflict by Karl Cordell and Stefan Wolff is intricately linked.³⁰ The primary catalyst for conflict arising between or among groups with distinct communal identities is ethnicity. Conflict arises when any of the communal factions perceives a sense of dissatisfaction or marginalisation by the governing authorities. This sense of dissatisfaction and frustration is often articulated as a consequence of economic and political discrimination. Benedict Anderson, in his work,

²⁷ Juan RI Cole and Deniz Kandiyoti, “Nationalism and the Colonial Legacy in the Middle East and Central Asia: Introduction,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 2 (2002): 189–203.

²⁸ Sandra Joireman, *Nationalism and Political Identity* (A&C Black, 2003).

²⁹ Joireman, *Nationalism and Political Identity*.

³⁰ Karl Cordell and Stefan Wolff, *Ethnic Conflict: Causes, Consequences, and Responses* (Polity, 2009).

Imagined Community: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, articulates: “It is imagined because the member of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their community.” Thus, drawing upon Anderson’s definition,³¹ it may be viewed that Pushtuns prefer alignment with Pashtuns even if they have never met before. Similarly, non-Pushtuns, though in the minority, will support their ethnicity. The ethnic polarisation is a recipe of social fragmentation, leading to political division among various segments of the society. Such a culture strengthens the role of few elites among each community, who try to instill the sense of insecurity among respective ethnic groups.

Fredrik Barth advocates that ethnic groups are typically characterised by four criteria: i. They engage in biological replication, ii. They share core cultural standards, iii. They form a sphere of communiqué and collaboration, and iv. They are delineated through both self-definition and external explanation.³² The final criterion emphasises the significance of individuals and locations, as they delineate the parameters of an ethnic group.

Within these confines, the study discerns the fundamental variables individuals employ to distinguish themselves from nearby residents. The specific cultural elements or symbols that represent that identity may vary, but the group will always be unique as long as its members recognise and respond to ethnicity. The defining characteristics of a group may originate from diverse sources, including common ancestry, religion, language, cultural practices, physical attributes, place of birth, or a combination of these factors. It does not matter if they can prove their claim of uniqueness with real evidence. No matter if it is based on real history or made up, the people who believe in it are very sure of its truth and constancy, and they act in accordance with that belief. In Afghanistan, there are two major ethnic groups: tribal and non-tribal. Tribes represent an ethnic group whose affiliates are related to each other through a common ancestor, whether that ancestor is real or thought to be real. In Afghanistan, lineage is determined by the male line.

³¹ Benedict R. O’G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 2006).

³² Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organisation of Culture Difference* (Waveland Press, 1998).

The extraordinary social attribute of Afghans resides in their indigenous ethnic or tribal divisions. People often put their allegiance with their immediate family, community, tribal ties, or ethnic groups, which are sometimes called *Quam*, above all else. There are many different groups living in Afghanistan's cities and towns. The word *Quam* is very flexible and broad, so what it means depends on the situation and the person asking. So, it does not just apply to these small ethnic groups; it also applies to the major groups in the realm. The preexistent identity sensitivities are very much exploitable and even an incident of minor nature presumed against *Quam*'s interests can fuel grievances. Each ethnic group, projecting itself to be a *Quam* looks towards its elders or influentials to guide them in any such event. The dominant social construct in Afghan society hinders any meaningful transition toward a more open and inclusive culture.

Pushtun Elite Constructivism — The Most Dominated Influence on Afghan Strategic Culture

The Pashtuns constitute a significant portion of Afghanistan's ethnic landscape, representing approximately 40 per cent of the total population and further divided into numerous tribes.³³ The discussion on Pashtun identity frequently emphasises the claim that the labels Afghans and Pashtuns are equivalent and can be used interchangeably. Nevertheless, the elite from non-Pashtun backgrounds assert that the term "Afghani" signifies the populace residing within Afghanistan, often referred to as the Land of Afghans.³⁴

The Pashtun elite articulate their genealogies and link their ancestry back to Qais Abdur Rashid, the presumed common progenitor of Pashtuns.³⁵ The various ancestries coalesce into more extensive clans, stemming out of Qais's three sons; Sarban, Bitan and Gharghast, which are subsequently organised into four principal descent groups. The Durrani, alternatively referred to as Abdalis, assert their lineage from the first son of

³³ Thomas J. Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 23-31.

³⁴ Anthony Hyman, "Nationalism in Afghanistan," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34, no. 2 (2002): 299-315.

³⁵ Alauddin Masood, "The Cradle of Pathan Culture," *Dawn*, April 4, 2004.

Qais.³⁶ Their geographical positioning is in the southwestern areas of Afghanistan. The principal tribal elements are categorised into the Zirak, which includes the Popalzai, Barakzai, Alikozai, and Achakzai, and the Panjpao, comprising the Alizai, Nurzai, and Isaqzai. Shinwari, Yusufzai, and Mohmand tribes, among the most notable Pashtun groups in Peshawar, assert their lineage through same ancestral line.³⁷ The Ghilzais, also known as Khaljis, reside in the eastern provinces and constitute the largest Pashtun faction.³⁸ The list includes the Tokhi, Hotaki, Nasiri, Kharoti, Sulaiman Khel, Taraki, and Ahmadzai tribes. The Gharghasht comprises tribes such as the Musa Khel, and Kakar neighbouring the Baloch, along with the Safi situated in the Kunar region. The Karlanri inhabit the region along the Pak-Afghan border, with the majority of their population concentrated in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Their sub-tribes encompass the Orakzai, Wardak, Wazir, Afridi, Khattak, Zadran, Jaji, Tani, Mahsud, Mangal, and Khugiani.³⁹

Oliver Roy speculates that Afghanistan has consistently vacillated between the notion of an intangible nation, characterised by its own rule, and the historic context of Pashtuns, understood as an ethnic group that has yet to attain its full nationhood.⁴⁰ Consequently, the inevitable result for the other ethnic groups has been their assimilation into Pashtun identity. They have employed the nation-state as a means to foster and enhance their own language, ethnic culture, and symbols, including modifications to soldierly titles⁴¹ and names of the areas from Persian and Turkish into Pashtu could be measured as observable examples. The political elites among the Pashtun have sought to appropriate nationalist themes and signs to project an image of cohesion to external observers, thereby legitimising their sustained grip on authority.

³⁶ Olaf Caroe, *The Pathans: 550 B.C.-A.D. 1957* (London: Macmillan, 1958), 86.

³⁷ Thomas J. Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 24.

³⁸ Tapper, Richard. *The Conflict of Tribe and State in Iran and Afghanistan*. London: Croom Helm; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983, p125.

³⁹ Thomas J. Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 25.

⁴⁰ Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan*, 2nd ed, Cambridge Middle East Library (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁴¹ Government of Afghanistan, "The Constitution for Application of Military Titles," Kabul, Kabul Languages Topographic Press, 1921.

An illustrative instance of a long-term perspective among the Pashtun community was notably articulated by the politician, Abdul Wali Khan when he was queried regarding his allegiance to Pakistan. He contemptuously asserted, “I am identified as a Pakistani for thirty years, as a Muslim for fourteen centuries, and as a Pashtun for five millennia.”⁴² The Pashtuns demonstrate this phenomenon by showcasing an exceptional ability to connect several lineages, comprising thousands of individuals, into a unified heredity beyond borders.

Contrary to Pushtun ethnic dynamics, Turkmen, Uzbeks, Kirghiz, Hazaras, and Aimaqs, offer some flexibility by allowing clans to be added or removed relatively easily within its framework. Although the Turkmen and numerous Uzbeks preserve intricate lineages within their respective clans, there exists flexibility in their hereditary essence, ultimately resulting in the inheritance of merely the clan name. In contrast, nontribal ethnic groups do not assert any genealogical connections among their members. The Tajiks, who speak Persian, represent the most significant nontribal demographic in Afghanistan. Predominantly adhering to Sunni beliefs, they do not claim a shared lineage; however, they uphold a collective identity, primarily defined by their geographical location. While the Hazaras possess an internal tribal organisation, their identity is predominantly shaped not by lineage but by their shared Persian language, Shia religious beliefs, and their acknowledged Mongol heritage.

It is frequently propagated by Afghans that the ethnic groups within their society are so markedly different that one can discern their identities solely through physical characteristics, where an individual conforms to an ethnic archetype. Nonetheless, due to prolonged intermarriage, there exists a considerable variation within any given ethnic group, especially among larger ones, rendering exemptions as frequent as the norm. The perception that ethnic identity is visually identifiable is greatly affected by the cues communicated by males via their clothing, particularly their robes and headwear. Women living in rural areas often display more culturally distinctive clothing and accessories; yet, most rarely reveal themselves to strangers or are concealed by veils in public spaces.

⁴² Abdul Wali Khan, “Interview,” *Pakistan Forum* 2, no. 9/10 (1972): 11–18.

The ethnic elite is drawn from a large number of major and minor ethnic groups in Afghanistan, divided along the lines of Pashtun and non-Pashtun. There is still no consensus on how to divide the population, with the Pashtun elite claim majority and right to rule entire Afghanistan.

Afghan Strategic Culture and the Sensitivities of Non-Pushtun Minorities

In Afghanistan, the sense of ethnic affiliation is more pronounced; however, the foundation of its national identity is predominantly anchored in religion, with Islam serving as the cornerstone for the legitimisation of state identity.⁴³ The conflicting assertions of ethnicity and religion, along with their manipulation by political elites, have profoundly impacted the cohesion and stability in Afghanistan.

Other ethnic groups often find themselves in marginalised communities, experiencing methodical suppression by Pashtun influentials concerning their authentic heritage, myths, culture, language, and land, in addition to facing discriminatory deprivation of power and wealth. The persistence of discriminatory policies rooted in religion, language, and ethnicity has fostered a climate of pessimism and animosity among various ethnic groups, culminating in significant unrest during the 1990s. From Gellner's perspective, medieval societies are fundamentally structured around inheritance ties of patronage. He posits that resilient clan-based systems exemplify medieval societies, in which the nation-state does not replace inheritance as the principal source of allegiance.⁴⁴

The complex interplay of ethnic and religious identities is most acutely observed in Afghanistan, where the Taliban committed crimes of massacre against the Shia and Tajik populations.⁴⁵ A similar process was reflected during the Bosnian civil war, where influence of ethno-religious identities

⁴³ Yunas Samad, *A Nation in Turmoil: Nationalism and Ethnicity in Pakistan, 1937-1958* (Sage : In association with the Book Review Literacy Trust, 1995).

⁴⁴ Cole and Kandiyoti, "Nationalism and the Colonial Legacy in the Middle East and Central Asia."

⁴⁵ Angelo Rasanayagam, *Afghanistan: A Modern History* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2003).

led towards ethnic predominance and even homogenisation.⁴⁶

Afghanistan exhibits a remarkably complex ethnic composition compared to other nations worldwide. Mountstuart Elphinstone posits that any scholar interested in studying Afghanistan will be amazed and may struggle to absorb how a state can endure amidst such chaos; the fluctuating array of forces lacks a foundational principle and merely illustrates the emergence of longstanding rivalries alongside novel conflicts of interest.⁴⁷ In the 1980s, the tribal-based government ultimately endorsed Marxist philosophy as a strategy to foster a civic state and enhance allegiance to the state. The resistance to the state predominantly arises from tribal and ethnic factions, alongside the urban communities, where Islamic identity has functioned as a unifying instrument, knitting together disparate ethnic identities and various groupings.⁴⁸ The fervent attachments to ethnic and religious identities can escalate to such violence that archaeological relics and ancient memorials become targets, serving as instruments for elimination of the historical context and identity of various ethnic groups in Afghanistan. The demolition of the Buddhas of Bamiyan and various archeological pieces at the Kabul museum, along with the alteration of regions, institutions, educational and soldierly titles as instruments of homogenisation, exemplifies ethno-nationalistic tendencies in Afghanistan.

It is crucial to understand the vocabulary and concepts associated with nationalism, as well as the several heated debates surrounding the subject, including ethno-nationalism,⁴⁹ theo-nationalism,⁵⁰ civic or democratic nationalisms,⁵¹ and the notion of the nation-state.⁵² The dynamics of

⁴⁶ Cole and Kandiyoti, "Nationalism and the Colonial Legacy in the Middle East and Central Asia."

⁴⁷ Amin Saikal, *Modern Afghanistan: A History of Struggle and Survival* (I.B.Tauris, 2006).

⁴⁸ Ali Banuazizi and Myron Weiner, *The State, Religion, and Ethnic Politics: Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan* (Syracuse University Press, 1988).

⁴⁹ Ethno-nationalism is a form of nationalism where the nation is defined primarily by shared ancestry, ethnicity, language, culture, religion, and common descent.

⁵⁰ Theo-nationalism refers to form of nationalism where the nation is defined primarily by collective religious identity and governed according to religious laws.

⁵¹ Civic nationalism is also called democratic nationalism, where the nation is defined by shared political values, citizenship and political community.

⁵² Nation-state is a political entity where the boundaries of the state (a territorial, sovereign political unit) align with the boundaries of the nation (a community of people who share a common identity).

Afghan/Pashtun nationalism, together with its consequences and conflicts, illustrate a complex interaction with the core tenets of democratic and civic nationalism, each exerting unique impacts.

Role of Religious Elite in the Afghan Power Politics

The religious elite in Afghanistan predominantly consists of Muslims who exert their influence via madrasas and tribal traditions. Tribal traditions and practices interweave with numerous subtleties, their influence apparent in all aspects of life. Approximately 80-85 per cent of the Afghan population practices Sunni Islam,⁵³ primarily adhering to the Hanafi school of thought. Shia Muslims represent roughly 15-20 per cent of the population, primarily comprising Hazaras, Qizilbash, and Farsiwan.⁵⁴ Sufi Islam occupies a prominent role, predominantly in Sunni population. The intricacies of sectarian dynamics are diverse and fragile, as the ideological differences between Sunnis and Shias have historically led to sporadic tensions and violence. The Deobandi movement, prominent in Sunni Afghan circles, is in confrontation with Salafi beliefs, which have gained support from specific Jihadi factions.⁵⁵

The propagation of Wahhabi philosophy, financially backed by Saudi Arabia, has significantly intensified sectarian tensions, reflecting the wider Saudi-Iranian rivalry.⁵⁶ The religious elite has considerable influence over the Ulema, who are responsible for interpreting Islamic law and advising the government. Mosques serve as vital centres for community involvement, educational activities, and sites for the erudite in religion. Madaris are managed by the Islamic elite and exert considerable influence on the

⁵³ Robert D. Lamb and Mariam Mufti, *Religion and Militancy in Pakistan and Afghanistan*, 2012, http://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/120709_Mufti_ReligionMilitancy_Web.pdf.

⁵⁴ Amin Saikal, "Afghanistan: The Status of the Shi'ite Hazara Minority," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 32, no. 1 (2012): 80–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2012.665623>.

⁵⁵ Kaneshka Nawabi, "Afghan Generational Radicalization," *Journal of Strategic Security* 18, no. 2 (2025): 19-31.

⁵⁶ Kotokey and Borthakur, "Arab-Islamic Influence on Afghanistan's Polity," in *Geopolitics of External Powers and Islam in Afghanistan: 1979-2021* (PhD diss., 2021), 6.3.1.

religious landscape.⁵⁷ The Taliban draws its power and recruits from these madaris. Radicalisation has severely diminished societal tolerance, negatively impacting women's education, while concurrently promoting extremism, sectarian violence, and undermining interfaith cooperation. The religious elite has consolidated considerable control in almost all areas and views modernity and education as potential threats to their interests and authority. Religious leaders engage in the political arena, setting policy and influencing decision-making processes.

The Pashtun and Afghan communities exhibit a profound association of ethnic and religious interconnectedness; these intense affiliations have been a driving force behind their nationalism. The governance of Afghanistan by the Pashtuns has consistently offered a skewed and fanciful assessment of the Pashtun demographic, ostensibly to validate their status as a majority. However, it is noteworthy that no objective census employing rigorous scientific methodology has been conducted since Afghanistan's inception as a political unit. In a civic and autonomous nation-state, the distinctions of religious/ethnic majorities and minorities should not be pursued as a measure of justice. Nevertheless, the citizenship of the individuals holds greater significance. The nation-state is characterised as a contemporary construct that distinguishes between traditional agrarian societies and contemporary industrial communities. However, in the context of Afghanistan, it largely retained its ancestral structure and experienced only limited influence from modern democratic and civil developments.

First, Taliban tenure remained in constant turmoil of infighting, which marked a period of extreme violence and brutality. The Taliban's profound sectarian biases were evident in their severe restrictions on people and their handling of non-Pashtun communities. The cessation of Ashura festival, Nawruz celebrations, and the obstruction faced by Afghanistan's Sikhs and Hindus in practicing their religious customs can be viewed not only as acts of religious persecution but also as a manifestation of ethnic aggression towards the historical narratives, traditions, myths, and beliefs of other ethnic groups within Afghanistan. The erosion of the Taliban's previous assertions of legitimacy as a credible political entity capable of fostering stability, order, and national reconciliation within a unified

⁵⁷ Haroun Rahimi "The Deoband–Taliban Nexus: A Study of the Taliban's Religious and Political Legacy in Afghanistan," *E-International Relations*, September 13, 2024.

Afghanistan was evident.⁵⁸

The hasty withdrawal of the U.S. paved the way for Taliban who established control over entire Afghanistan. Present regime seems to be more politically and religiously mild towards minority sects. There is marginally decrease in sectarian violence,⁵⁹ however, they have failed to control terrorist organisations like Tehreek-i-Taliban (TTP) and ISIS in Afghanistan. This has resulted in souring relations with neighbouring countries, Pakistan in particular.

Limited Role of Educational System in Afghan Strategic Culture

The instability caused by civil conflict, foreign interference, and elite interests has severely compromised the fragile educational system in Afghanistan. Educational access is constrained, with enrollment rates restricted to 60 per cent for males and 30 per cent for females. Over 3.7 million children are presently not enrolled in school, constituting 40 per cent of the school-age population.⁶⁰ A range of restrictions has been noted, include gaps in access between urban and rural regions, gender differences, insufficient infrastructure, a lack of qualified educators, an obsolete curriculum, budgetary restraints, security concerns, and societal pressures.⁶¹ The absence of strong foreign support has intensified the complexity of the situation.

The Afghan diaspora can significantly contribute to nation-building and overcoming societal divides in Afghanistan. The Afghan diaspora includes approximately 5 to 6 million Afghans who have migrated and settled in foreign countries. This migration has been predominantly motivated by civil war, internal conflict, economic difficulties, and the quest for improved employment opportunities. The majority of Afghan expats reside in Pakistan, followed by Iran, the U.S., Europe, the Middle East, Australia, and Canada. They are pursuing peace and are ardent proponents of democracy in

⁵⁸ Rasanayagam, *Afghanistan*.

⁵⁹ USIP, *The Taliban's Religious Roadmap: Afghan Minorities Under the New Regime*, no. 539 (United States Institute of Peace, 2023), 1–5.

⁶⁰ UNESCO, *The Broken Promise to Educate All Children: Afghanistan a Year after the Taliban Takeover* (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2023).

⁶¹ IIEP, *Afghanistan: Crisis-Sensitive Educational Planning for a Rapidly Changing Context* (UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning, 2023).

Afghanistan. They represent the progressive segment of Afghan society and promote innovative administration, opposing the supremacy of the religious elite. Ehsan Bayat, an Afghan entrepreneur, and Hamid Karzai, the former President of Afghanistan, are prominent figures in the realms of business and influence. Ahmad Wali, a prominent Afghan singer, Nasir Shansab, an esteemed Afghan writer, and Hassan Abbas, a distinguished academic, have made significant contributions to the realms of art, culture, and academia. The diaspora plays a significant role in Afghan society through remittances, economic assistance, and humanitarian support. Nevertheless, they exert influence on Afghan society by advocating for elections, democracy, and education, which poses a challenge to the Taliban regime. The Afghan intellectual elite can contribute to shaping the cultural, social, and political landscapes of Afghanistan.

Conclusion

The process of state-building is not an organic occurrence; rather, it is a deliberate political endeavour influenced by social and economic factors. The inability of the Afghan government to realise its objective of constructing a robust and cohesive state has been characterised by both statesmen and scholars as a consequence of the nation's geophysical challenges, ethnic and religious sectarian divisions, and the prevailing tribal structures within the country. However, this study argues that these factors alone do not sufficiently explain Afghanistan's persistent instability. Instead, the central finding of this paper is that Afghanistan's anarchy has been reproduced through elite pluralism and elite instrumentalism, in which competing ethnic, tribal, political, and religious elites deliberately exploit social cleavages and state weakness to preserve their power.⁶² The challenges of the nation-building process are conveniently externalised by attributing them to foreign hands, a claim that is compounded by the disjointed nature of Afghan society. Such narratives often obscure the role of domestic elite competition in perpetuating political and social discord, fragmentation, and resistance to centralised governance. The geographical characteristics of Afghanistan, coupled with the socio-cultural and structural heterogeneity within Afghan society, have undoubtedly shaped the processes of nation and state formation in the region. However, the

⁶² Banuazizi and Weiner, *The State, Religion, and Ethnic Politics*.

paper demonstrates that these structural conditions became politically destabilising only when instrumentalised by rival elites. One could argue that the central governments' policies and actions toward different ethnic and cultural groups have changed the way social and cultural pluralism operates, leading to different forms of structural fragmentation and resistance to centralised authority, driven by ethnic, religious, sectarian, regional, and tribal factors. Thus, pluralism in itself is not the problem; rather, its manipulation by elites has transformed diversity into a persistent source of conflict.

The implementation of these policies and practices has consequently had a detrimental effect on the state-building process in Afghanistan. After 2001, a rudimentary amalgamation of ethnic factions within state frameworks has replaced the pursuit of genuine national cohesion. The Karzai and Ghani administrations, instead of building a civic and merit-based state, largely accommodated elite patronage networks, thereby reinforcing exclusion, corruption, and institutional fragility. Nevertheless, the allocation of government positions has been predominantly entrusted to prominent ethnic leaders, along with their relatives and associates, rather than striving to form a genuine civic and democratic government that would facilitate merit-based engagement of all ethnic groups in Afghanistan. Similarly, the Taliban's return did not resolve these competitive dynamics; rather, it replaced plural elite contestation with a centralised but exclusionary form of domination rooted in a singular religious-political narrative. While this model reduced overt elite fragmentation, it has failed to establish an inclusive and legitimate political order capable of generating durable peace.

The advancement of moderation and democracy in Afghanistan hinges on the government's ability to empower assemblies and expand non-traditional avenues of participation at all levels. Based on the core findings of this paper, the alternative to Afghanistan's recurring instability lies in an inclusive political settlement that reduces the incentives for elite instrumentalism. Such a model requires power-sharing among major ethnic and political constituencies, merit-based institutional reform, equitable political representation, and the strengthening of the rule of law over personalised patronage. For Afghanistan to establish a successful state, and indeed a cohesive nation, it requires robust and democratic engagement from all ethnic and religious communities, adherence to the rule of law, political liberties, and a commitment to accountability. Moreover, civil

society must be fortified. A national government requires a national constituency to facilitate Afghanistan's gradual democratisation.⁶³

To resolve the persistent cycle of anarchy and civil conflict, Afghanistan's diverse elite must transcend their individual differences and collaboratively pursue a cohesive vision for the nation. The study, therefore, concludes that Afghanistan's instability is less a failure of state-building capacity than a consequence of elite-driven obstruction of inclusive state formation. Unless elite incentives are transformed from divisive competition toward negotiated coexistence, the cycle of fragmentation, weak governance, and protracted conflict is likely to persist. This necessitates a readiness to compromise and to distribute authority, alongside a dedication to addressing the fundamental issues that have fuelled the nation's instability. Accordingly, the most viable pathway forward is not merely stronger centralisation, but a legitimate and inclusive political order in which state institutions are insulated from ethnic, tribal, and religious manipulation. The global community also bears significant responsibility for promoting Afghanistan's development and creating a conducive environment for the socio-political elite to collaborate towards achieving a more stable and prosperous future. However, sustainable peace will ultimately depend on internal elite accommodation and the reconstruction of a civic national compact within Afghanistan itself.

⁶³ Robert I. Rotberg, *Building a New Afghanistan* (Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2007).