Significance of the Public Trust in State Institutions for the Post-Conflict Reconstruction, Stabilisation and Fighting Insurgencies – The Case of Afghanistan

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INTRODUCTION

The people of Afghanistan experienced coup d'états, invasions, insurgencies, civil war and tyranny since the middle of the 1970s. A country with a history of turmoil and political instability enjoyed relative peace and stability for nearly half a century between 1929 and 1973 before the quest for transformation and political advancement plunged Afghanistan into chaos and violence.[1] The protraction of the conflict not only destroyed the organisational structures of the country but also eroded public trust in the political leadership.[2]

The attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001 caused a tremor among the world community and quickly focus was shifted to Afghanistan. The country was recognised as pivot of operation of the 9/11 attacks and centripetal to extremist outfits. The US-led military campaign against the Taliban regime and the al-Qaeda terrorist network it was sheltering began on 7 October 2001.[3] The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), under the leadership of the United States of America, invaded the country, toppled the tyrant regime of the Taliban and established an interim administration in a conference in the German city of Bonn – famously known as Bonn Conference.[4] The fall of the Taliban at the end of

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[1] Rasanayagam, Angelo. 2003. *Afghanistan: A Modern History.* New York: I. B. Tauris.

[2] Rubin, Barnett R. 2002. *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan.* USA: Yale University.

[3] Tarzi, Amin. 2009. "The Neo-Taliban." In *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan*, Robert D. Crews and Amin Tarzi (ed.), 274-310. London: Harvard University Press.

[4] Johnson, Chris, and Jolyon Leslie. 2004. *Afghanistan: The mirage of peace.* New York: Zed Books.

2001 marked the end of a protracted civil war in Afghanistan and the beginning of a recovery and healing process, opening the way for Afghanistan to free itself from extremism and international isolation.[5]

The new democratic state system, re-establishment of the state institutions and generous financial, technical and moral support of the international community created a fervour among people. However, the new state system failed to live up to the expectations of the Afghans and the optimism started to recede within the public. The power sharing amongst notorious warlords, facilitated by the United States, was a first step towards creating unease in the society anticipating a change in leadership. Also, share in power was distributed based on ethno-centric allegiances that promoted nepotism, favouritism and widespread corruption. A culture of impunity and lack of quality service delivery also evaporated the public trust in the state governance system. Adding the political wrangling, quests for share in power at the cost of political ideology and contested election results inflicted serious blows to the public trust in the political system. The rule of law is in part what an effective national government promises.[6] The failure of the state to promote rule of law and the lack of responsiveness of the security sector contributed towards the erosion of a sense of security.

Since 2001, barring the first few years when the country enjoyed relative stability, Afghanistan has backtracked into political, social and economic instability while the country has seen the re-emergence of insurgent groups resulting in an upsurge in armed conflict across the country. Looking at the current Afghan context, questions are asked whether the current detrimental political divide, social in-cohesion, economic recession and expansion of armed conflict can be associated with the lack of public trust. This paper seeks to answer this question based on the Afghan experience for the post-conflict and fragile states.

[5] Jalali, Ali A. 2007. "Legacy of War and Challenge of Peace Building." In *Building a New Afghanistan*, Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), 22-55. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press.

[6] Rotberg, Robert I. 2007. "Renewing the Afghan State." In *Building a New Afghanistan*, Robert I. Rotberg (ed.), 1-21. Washington DC: Brooking Institution Press.

IMPORTANCE OF PUBLIC TRUST IN POST-CONFLICT SETTINGS

Trust is a fundamental concept in the field of peace research.[7] It is referred to as the foundation of social cooperation and positive peace.[8] The conflict-ravaged countries are generally faced with the threat of sliding back into conflict and are qualified as fragile states. Based on the model of security dilemma, as per Wong, Walter[9] showed that the possibility of opponents eventually exploiting trust forms a critical barrier to civil war settlement.[10]

The lack of public trust in the post-conflict arrangements and institutional processes can hinder the recovery and allow rogue outfits to pursue their wicked agendas. Absence of trust in the political processes, such as elections, could create a void for fraud in the elections which can be a potential threat to the peaceful transfer of power. The more people participate in the political activities, the more every process gains legitimacy. Similarly, alignment of social and political groups on conflict time allegiances can curtail the capacity of the state in implementing reform processes in the state institutions objectively.

On the other hand, the end of conflict and possibility of a peaceful, just society offers hope and optimism. Trust acts like a lubricant that facilitates both economic exchange and political participation.[11] The publics of the post-conflict societies start believing that they could be living in a country that gives them a chance to enjoy peace, stability, justice, equal opportunity and a possibility to prosper as in-dividuals and as a society. Peter Blau, as part of his exchange theory, suggests that trust-building is a social exchange process where one side of the relation provides benefits to the other and to seek reciprocation.[12]

A state system existing between hope and despair is always in need of support and trust of its people. The state is always in need of backing in order to imple-

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[7] Wong, Pui-Hang. 2016. "How can political trust be built after civil wars? Evidence from post-conflict Sierra Leone." *Journal of Peace Research:* 772-785.

[8] Galtung, Johan. 1969. "Violence, peace, and peace research." *Journal of Peace Research:* 167–191.

[9] Walter, Barbara. 1997. "The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement." *International Organisation:* 335-364.

[10] Wong, op. cit.

[11] Fukuyama, Francis. 2018. *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

[12] Blau, Peter M. 1964. *Exchange and Power in Social Life.* New York: Wiley.

ment the agreements made as part of the peace deal ending the conflict, putting institutions in place, embarking on necessary reform processes in all sectors and constraining the spoiler efforts of groups and individuals trying to threaten the progress towards peace and stability. Public trust can give quintessential confidence to the state administration to make difficult decisions. Processes, such as establishing constitutional arrangements, elections for the public offices, security sector reforms for the establishment of the monopoly of the state on the use of violence and assigning the right people in the civil bureaucracy, will also require active participation of the public, oversight, and civil and political activism.

Public oversight of the state-building activities is of paramount importance. Lack of civil and political activism, public participation and social mobilisation can leave a huge space for the manipulators leaving the post conflict country vulnerable to clashes among the interest groups. However, trust can only be garnered with efforts rooted in public participation, integrity, transparency and demonstration of objectivity in the practices. The presentation of these ingredients in practice can further public trust in the state apparatus and leadership, enhance public support and subdue the monopoly of the interest groups. As a result, the state is able to progress towards durable peace, stability and prosperity.

LOSS OF TRUST THE AFGHAN ODYSSEY

Afghanistan has been going through phases of conflict and instability since 1978, where power has been changing hands quite frequently. However, in the wake of the upheavals of 11 September 2001, the establishment of an interim government in the Bonn Conference that offered a roadmap for democratisation of Afghanistan was a reason of hope for the people. The vision for the country was set at a time when the tyrant regime of Taliban had been toppled, and a new beginning for Afghan citizens was heralded. The beginning promised transition from conflict, instability, warlordism and tyranny to the rule of law, stability, prosperity and modern democracy.

The establishment of the new government, called the Interim Government, was welcomed by repatriation of three million Afghan refugees to the country.[13] Educated cadres living in refuge in the region and beyond also made their way back to the country with a hope to lead the post-conflict reconstruction where they would have the opportunity to live with security of their rights and possibility of

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[13] UNHCR. 2004. *Afghanistan: Challenges to Return.* Situation Update, Geneva: UNHCR.

taking leadership roles in the different spheres of the society. Political and civil activism surfaced in the society.

While the enthusiasm for a new beginning among the public peaked, the state leadership did not live up to the expectations. Old warlords disarmed at least partially, but most – disarmed or not – retained political and economic muscle.[14] The Bonn Conference distributed power among parties and warlords with a history of engagement in the bloody civil war. The transitional justice was thoroughly neglected by the facilitators of the political settlement led by the USA. In addition, groups like the Taliban and Hizb-e-Islami were not invited to the conference which was dominated by the Northern Alliance mainly comprised of the Tajik ethnic group leaving the Pashtuns, the dominant ethnic group, to feel excluded.[15] Many ethnic Pashtuns perceived that they lacked meaningful representation in the central government, particularly in its security institutions which resulted in grievances among a strong segment of the society.[16]

While the Bonn Conference produced far from ideal decisions, Afghans continued to maintain their positive posture vis-à-vis their future. The effort towards developing a society, where rule of law thrived and democratic principles were practised, continued. Civil society organisations mushroomed across the country, political parties and groups engaged in social and political mobilisation of the communities. It was hoped that the emergency *Loya Jirga*[17] would broaden the base of the government, assert civilian leadership, promote the democratic process, and take authority away from the regional leaders.[18] However, the outcome of the process did not live up to public expectations. Strongly influenced and manipulated by the warlords, the meeting hardly addressed the main concerns and failed to establish a balanced and representative transitional administration.[19]

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[14] Newberg, Paula R. 2007. "Neither Stable nor Stationary: Politics of Transition and Recovery." In *Building a New Afghanistan*, Robert I. Rotberg, (ed.) 82-97. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

[15] International Crisis Group. 2011. *Afghanistan's Elections Stalemate.* Update Briefing, Kabul/Brussels: International Crisis Group.

[16] International Crisis Group. 2003. *Afghanistan: The Problem of Pashtoon Alienation.* Asia Situation Report Series, Kabul/Brussels: International Crisis Group.

[17] Traditional grand assembly of elders with an authority to decide upon issues of higher national value.

[18] Jalali, Ali A. 2007. "Legacy of War and Challenge of Peace Building." In *Building a New Afghanistan*, Robert I. Rotberg, 22-55. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press.

[19] Jalali, op. cit.

The presidential election in 2004 was a watershed event in Afghanistan. People for the first time in the history of the country directly voted for electing their head of state. A very healthy electoral campaign was run by the candidates across the country which resulted in a strong election turnout. Similarly, election for *Wolesi Jirga* (Lower House of the Parliament) also took place during 2005 where again people voted in good numbers.

However, the elected government maintained the status quo of the pre-election period and included warlords and their protégés in the national cabinet and provincial Government offices. Throughout the international involvement in Afghanistan, the United States and the international community relied on warlords with a long record of serious human rights abuses for continuing military operations against the remnants of the Taliban, strengthening these powerbrokers and weakening Kabul's already tenuous writ.[20] This was the beginning of disappointment among the citizens and an initial hit to their trust and confidence in the new democratic state.

Satisfaction with Government Performance
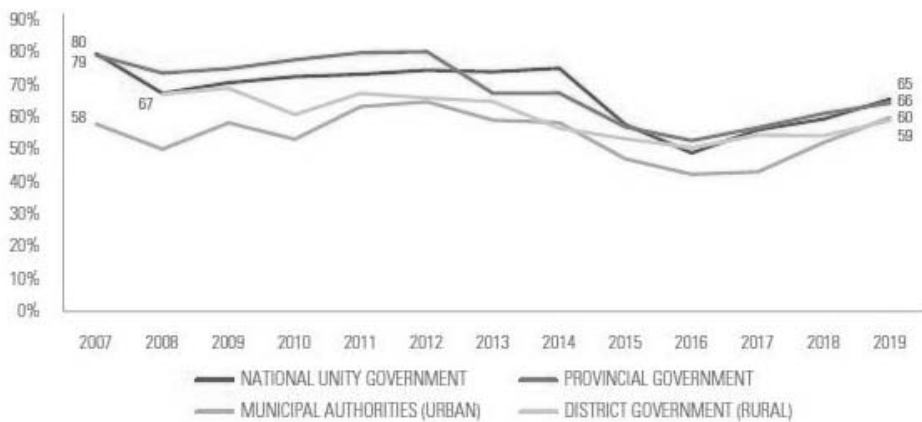
Data and Chart Source: Asia Foundation, A Survey of the Afghan People[21]

As the government handed the reins of the administration to the warlords instead of qualified technocrats, it could not perform as per the basic principles of

20 Felbab-Brown, Vanda. 2017. *Afghanistan Affectations: How to Break Political-Criminal Alliances in Contexts of Transition.* Crime-Conflict Nexus Series, Tokyo: United Nations University.

21 Asia Foundation (https://asiafoundation.org/publication/afghanistan-in-2019-a-survey-of-the-afghan-people/), accessed on 2 November 2020.

good governance. In all societies – especially those emerging from violence – where administrative and social services are lacking or provided inequitably, the resulting void or imbalance is a common driver of conflict.[22] In post-conflict settings services can be controlled and manipulated, creating or exacerbating horizontal inequalities and fuelling discontent rather than offering a means to foster trust and better relations between state and society.[23] Felbab-Brown observes that the anti-corruption and anti-criminality efforts were not underpinned by political heft and power, such as cutting off aid to or otherwise sanctioning particular powerbrokers. Hence, she says, pernicious individual powerbrokers and the political system quickly learned how to ride the anti-corruption and anti-crime efforts, further delegitimising the system and enabling a significant intensification of the Taliban's insurgency in Afghanistan.[24]

Failure of the government to meet the expectations of the people, continued bad governance and ever-expanding corruption dampened the trust of the public. Failure of the rule of law sector, including police and judiciary, significantly damaged the public faith in the state. The public lost confidence in the formal justice sector amid an atmosphere of impunity, as reported by the International Crisis Group (ICG). The report adds, a growing majority of Afghans have been forced to accept the rough justice of Taliban and criminal powerbrokers in areas of the country that lie beyond government control.[25]

As a result of the bad governance and continuation of the status quo, trust and support of the people in the state institutions evaporated. The lack of trust could be observed from the fact that peoples' participation in democratic processes declined. The public participation percentage got lowered in the second presidential elections in 2009 which was marred by political wrangling and rejection of the results by the losing candidates.[26] In addition, the post-election government did little to reform its practices and continued to generously reward the same group that derailed Afghanistan's journey on the path of development and prosperity. As a result, the public trust was further weakened, and people's enthusiasm continued to vanish.

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[22] McCandless, Erin. 2012. *Peace Dividends and Beyond: Contributions of Administrative and Social Services to Peacebuilding.* New York: United Nations Peacebuilding Support Office.
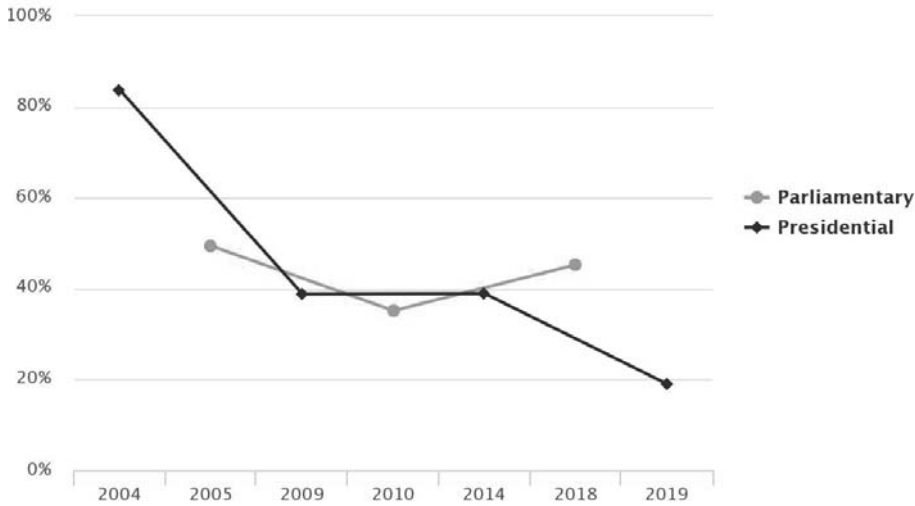
[23] McCandless, op. cit.

[24] Felbab-Brown, op. cit.

[25] International Crisis Group. 2010. *Reforming Afghanistan's Broken Judiciary.* Analytical Report-Asia Report Series, Brussels: International Crisis Group.

[26] Eide, Kai. 2012. *Power Struggle over Afghanistan.* New York: Skyhorse.

Voter Turnout by Election Type - Afghanistan

Data and Chart Source: International IDEA Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance[27].

The failure of the previous administrations significantly reduced public's trust in the political polity and processes. Corruption and a failed election process left serious doubt about the resulting legitimacy of each successive election.[28] It was evident in 2014, where election turnout significantly declined. The election result was once again contested and after a lot of political brinkmanship, an unconstitutional National Unity Government[29] (NUG) was established where the power was shared between the winner, Ashraf Ghani, and the runner up, Abdullah Abdullah.[30] This was the beginning of another round of political wrangling where the two leaders continued to clash on cabinet appointments.[31] It was an absolutely pulverising blow to the national confidence and trust in the Afghan government, effects which

[27] https://www.idea.int/data-tools/country-view/44/40. Accessed on 2 November 2020.

[28] Cordesman, Anthony H. 2019. *Afghanistan:A War in Crisis!* Research Report, Center for Strategic and International Studies.

[29] https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/resources/afghan-government-documents/the-government-of-national-unity-deal-full-text/. Full text of the NUG agreement, accessed on 2 November 2020.

[30] Kerry, John. 2018. *Every Day is Extra.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

[31] van Bijlert, Martine. 2016. *Afghanistan's National Unity Government Rift (2): The problems that will not go away.* Political Landscape, Kabul: Afghan Analysts Network.

became visible during the presidential election of 2019, where a vast majority of the people stayed away from the elections.

As any other civil war, the Afghan conflict has also fractured the social fabric of the country on ethnic grounds. The post-Bonn era promised a lot to help the country build social cohesion, promote social integration and make the Afghan nation generate a national vision. However, the governments continuously failed to offer a nation-building agenda. The existing social cleavages that were furthered by the Bonn Conference as power was distributed on ethnic lines were expanded as a result of the political bickering.

The politicians used the ethno-political card in order to pursue their agenda for claiming their stake in power and as such tried to mobilise the masses around ethno-centric rhetoric. As a result, the Afghan society lost the chance of getting behind a national political agenda and as such, ethno-centric rhetoric superseded the issue-based politics. Consequently, the opportunity for nation-building was lost, which added to the vulnerabilities of the society. The ethnicity-focused political drives significantly hindered any effort towards reforms as action against individuals was recognised as one against an ethnic group. This resulted in promotion of a culture of impunity and emboldened individuals to exploit public sentiments for the personal gains.

The culture of impunity and deployments based on allegiance to certain groups and individuals encouraged the public office holders to engage in corruption, embezzlement, and bribery in the state institutions. Corruption and weak institutional capacity are key drivers of conflict in Afghanistan.[32] Felbab-Brown believes that the Taliban, too, has become involved in the country's many illicit economies, such as drug trafficking, illegal mining and logging as well as extortion, its power abuses have been significantly more limited than those of the government-linked powerbrokers. She believes that while brutal and responsible for most deaths in Afghanistan's conflict, the Taliban can portray itself as less corrupt and as able to resolve disputes, act against crime, and deliver swift justice, rough as it may be.[33] Corruption in Afghanistan undermines the provision of basic services, enables the production and trafficking of narcotics and fuels instability.[34] Lack of public service delivery and bad governance at the central, but more particularly at the

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[32] Wheatland, Ben. 2015. *Afghanistan: Corruption as a driver of conflict.* Expert Answer Report, Anti-Corruption Resource Center.

[33] Felbab-Brown, op. cit.

[34] Bak, Mathias. 2019. *Corruption in Afghanistan and the role of development assistance.* Analytical, Transparency International.

sub-national level, cost the state the loss of public support, which created space for the anti-government militant groups to operate.

Perception of Corruption as a Problem in Afghanistan
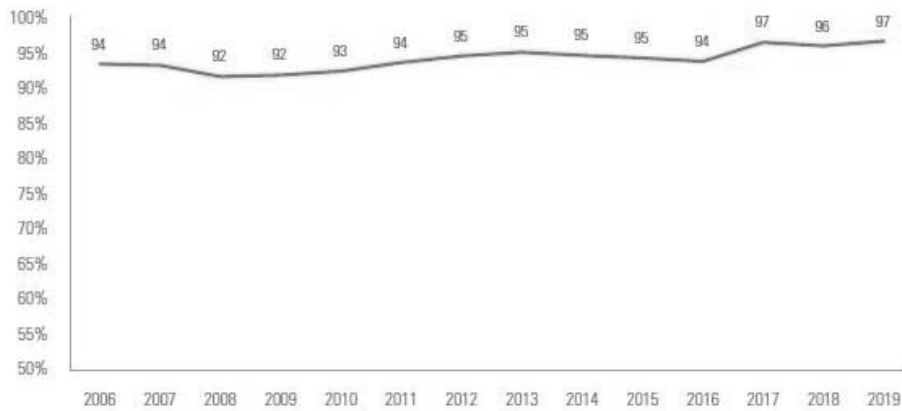
Data and Chart Source: Asia Foundation, A Survey of the Afghan People.[35]

For any asymmetric warfare to succeed, among many pre-requisites, one is in-difference of the public towards the mobility of insurgents in their neighborhoods. In the case of Afghanistan too, communities faced with bad governance and lack of public service delivery, withdrew their support of the government which al-lowed the militant groups to operate from within the communities. As has been the case in other similar contexts such as Nigeria, due to the lack of the communi-ties' support to the government, local communities turned into home ground for the militant groups. Marshall writes about the Nigerian experience, one similar to Afghanistan, where much of the population in the Boko Haram dominated com-munities did not cooperate with national military, either for fear of reprisal or due to a shared resentment.[36]

The hide and seek between the forces and militant groups was played out with-in the communities. As a result, huge civilian casualties were inflicted, while people were arrested and imprisoned for years based on the suspicion of supporting the militant groups. As a result, the armed opposition of the government found an op-portunity to run propaganda campaigns against the government which not only

[35] Asia Foundation (https://asiafoundation.org/publication/afghanistan-in-2019-a-survey-of-the-afghan-people/), accessed on 2 November 2020.

[36] Marshall, Tim. 2015. *Prisoners of Geography.* New York: Scribner.

earned them public sympathies but also ground for recruitment of foot soldiers. Continued cycles of violence as part of the asymmetric warfare, lack of public support, bad governance and inability of the government to repair its relations with the people furthered the gap between the public and the state, allowing the militant groups to extend their influence across the country.

The exponential increase in the level of violence in the country over the course of years dented the confidence of the business community as well. The business interventions and economic development activities were stalled by the ever-increasing violence, which ultimately cost the impoverished people. This added to the desperation and derailed trust and confidence of the people in the state and government.

IMPACT OF TRUST DEFICIT

Amid an ongoing guerrilla insurgency, the Afghan governments, one after the other, failed to maintain and expand public support. The 2018 National Corruption Survey of the Integrity Watch Afghanistan reports that 43 percent of the respondents "Strongly Agree or Agree" with the statement that "because of corruption people in our area refer to the Taliban", up from the 39 percent of 2016.[37] Consequently, the militant groups found space for establishing themselves which allowed garner sympathies of the local communities. The effort brought them more success in direct proportion with the governance practices. The more an area experienced bad governance, the more the communities receded towards the militants' lap.

The evaporation of the public trust allowed the insurgent groups to re-surface and establish themselves as a potent threat to the modern Afghan state. The Integrity Watch Afghanistan report quotes a commentator suggesting: "Extensive predatory criminality, corruption, and power abuse – not effectively countered by the Afghan government – have facilitated the Taliban's entrenchment".[38] The strong re-emergence of the militant groups and their penetration into the Afghan society gave an opportunity to the local and regional spoilers to intervene in the country. Corruption significantly undermined the US mission[39] in Afghanistan by damaging the legitimacy of the Afghan government, strengthening popular support for the

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[37] Integrity Watch Afghanistan. 2018. *National Corruption Survey.* Public Perception Survey, Kabul: Integrity Watch Afghanistan.

[38] Integrity Watch Afghanistan, op. cit.

[39] Counter terrorism mission.

insurgency, and channelling material resources to insurgent groups.[40] The opium economy boomed amidst ongoing violence and lack of state hold on poppy growing areas made the Afghan market lucrative for the local and regional drug dealers. The drug economy grew so big that it was able to fund militancy in the country and as such a vicious cycle was established. Besides, illegal mining, extortion, kidnapping and illegal taxation by non-state actors became a common phenomenon across the country. The more the illicit economy gained strength, the more the state economy declined. In addition, lack of licit economic opportunities and lucrativeness of the illicit ones attracted the youth as well as the rural elite of the country which resulted in further decline in support for the state contributing significantly to the evaporation of public trust in the government.

The financial gains made out of the illicit economic activities and corruption gave a strong position to a very small segment of the society which started to engage in the state politics as well. The engagement of individuals with large sums of money restricted a more genuine leadership of the country to emerge and get established. Young cadre and genuine potential leaders of Afghanistan had their confidence battered, and trust in state and the government damaged.

The rise of violent extremism in the Islamic world has many causes, but it is clear that a close correlation exists between broad failures in governance, economics, and coping with population growth; and the emergence of large-scale violence, and a shift from terrorism to insurgency.[41] In the Afghan context the insurgents have now been able to challenge the very survival of an Afghan democratic state system. The gains made vis-à-vis state security, economic growth, social development and political stability has been on a reversed path. The resurgence of the Taliban and their domination in both military and political spheres is a significant blow to the modern Afghan state.

The insurgent groups have been able to emerge as a dominant force dictating terms both in military as well as political spheres. Currently negotiating a peace deal with the Afghan government, they have been able to secure maximum concessions and have their demands endorsed by the US negotiating team.[42] In the meantime,

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[40] SIGAR. 2016. *Corruption in Conflict: Lessons from the US Experience in Afghanistan.* Analytical, Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR).

[41] Cordesman, op. cit.

[42] The Doha Agreement signed between the US and the Taliban (https://www.state.gov/agreement-for-bringing-peace-to-afghanistan/), accessed 2 November 2020.

they have been fighting fiercely challenging the state stability.[43] Afghanistan is faced with an uncertain future and the country is faced with prospects of a civil war and instability in the event the peace process fails to deliver a peace deal. Even if a peace deal is achieved, it could be at the cost of democratic liberties and people's rights, leaving the country on the brink of yet another collapse.

CONCLUSION

The public trust is of paramount importance in the post-conflict setting for conflict transformation and peace-building. Societies having faced civil war and prolonged instability are always in need of people's support to the state system. Particularly, a society like Afghanistan where multiple non-state actors remain active with the capacity to disrupt a country's progress on the path to recovery and stability, garnering public trust is crucial for the government.

The public joins the national streams with a positive frame of mind and an expectation that the days of misfortune are over. In such circumstances, the society is prepared to contribute to the national processes and enjoy engagement in state-building and nation-building processes. However, maintaining the trust always requires showing progress in practice and delivering results as duty bearer. Good governance, rule of law and commitment to reforms must be exercised in order to maintain and further public trust.

However, the Afghan political leadership failed to maintain public trust and as such their support. Reminders by experts about regaining public trust were given, yet not followed by real action. The ICG wrote that the survival of the Afghan government depended on the ability of all stakeholders to reduce the trust deficit between the Afghan people and their government by adopting genuine reforms.[44] However, no actions were taken because of which people's support continually declined and evaporated due to non-fulfilment of their expectations. This generated an opportunity for the militant actors to join the fray and exploit the trust deficit between the state institutions and citizens. Lack of public trust and indifference towards the mobility of insurgents created a vicious cycle which continuously

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[43] Quilty, Andrew. 2020. *Taleban Opportunism and ANSF Frustration: How the Afghan conflict has changed since the Doha agreement.* Situation Update, Kabul: Afghan Analysts Network.

[44] International Crisis Group. 2011. *The Insurgency in Afghanistan's Heartland.* Asia Situation Report Series, Kabul/Brussels: International Crisis Group.

widened the gap between the state and its citizens leaving Afghanistan's nascent democracy and modern state system at the mercy of insurgents.

Public trust is important for any society to succeed on the road to prosperity. Nevertheless, it is a crucial factor in conflict transformation, stabilisation and economic development. On the other hand, withdrawal of the trust by the state citizens adds to fragility of the country and allows the spoilers to exploit the situation in pursuit of their agenda. Afghanistan had a great chance to smoothly sail through post-conflict stabilisation, conflict transformation, economic development, political maturity and institutional development after the years of civil war and instability. However, the state was not able to sustain the public trust vested in the post-Bonn governments as a result of which it is facing perils of relapse into state collapse, or, at minimum, loss of genuine democracy.

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