

Commentary

Afghanistan: A Vicious Cycle of State Failure

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State building in Afghanistan has not lived up to its promise. Afghans are fleeing the country in near record numbers, the second-largest migrant group fleeing to Europe after Syrians. Public opinion polls show less confidence in the government of Afghanistan today than a decade ago despite vast spending on creating a state. While the immediate cause of the current crisis in Afghanistan stems from insecurity, most observers agree that poor governance triggered the continued antigovernment insurgency. But the governance failure in Afghanistan does not stem from a lack of state capacity, as most people think. On the contrary, the problem is neglect of essential constraints on state capacity.

The practice of equating good governance with state capacity has an impressive pedigree. For example, Francis Fukuyama has recently emphasized the importance of “power-deploying institutions.” Academics, he says, have given undue attention to “institutions that limit or check power” (Fukuyama 2013, 347–348). According to this perspective, constraints lead to gridlock and paralysis. Capacity, by contrast, promises to win the hearts and minds of citizens by showing what government can do.

This article suggests a different lesson from Afghanistan. The past 15 years show that obsessive drives to build quick capacity and relative lack of attention to constraints can undermine efforts to construct a more competent and orderly state, especially in persistently weak states.

In Afghanistan, the prioritization of capacity over constraints had three consequences. The first is vast corruption as a result of massive influxes of donor funds. Second, the drive to build capacity quickly reduced incentives for meaningful reform of the system of public administration and instead revived the old, unresponsive Soviet-influenced centralized bureaucracy. Finally, donor influxes overwhelmed what limited government capacity existed, further undermining governance because donors and Afghans turned to parallel structures to get things done.

The prioritization of capacity without strong constraints on the state is a familiar story. Indeed, Afghan rulers have blamed weak capacity as an explanation for political disorder and underdevelopment for more than a century. Regardless of ideology, most rulers focused on building strong states that, without checks, became brutishly violent, corrupt, or dysfunctional. With good reason,

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Afghans rebelled against these governments. When the dust of conflict cleared, subsequent rulers used foreign aid to facilitate even more ambitious state-building programs, which fostered a return to violence employed by either the state or those seeking to fight against its transgressions. The country has been trapped in this vicious cycle of poor governance—fed by desires to build quick state capacity without sufficient attention to political constraints—for a very long time.

The most recent drive for capacity that commenced with the fall of the Taliban government in 2001 was much more grandiose than any in the past. The international community with willing government partners injected massive funds with the hope of winning hearts and minds through improved service delivery mechanisms. This resulted in an ambitious Afghanistan National Development Strategy, developed by the Afghan government with donor support, which provided an exhaustive master plan of the road to prosperity. The 2004 constitution promised a litany of positive rights to citizens, which were to be implemented by dozens of centralized ministries in Kabul. Continued reliance on centralization was convenient for donors: It allowed them to work with government partners who could promise the Afghan public and those in donor countries speedy progress.

The post-2001 government did feature some constraints on state power, but they were weak. These included democratic elections for the president, the national assembly, and provincial councils. Although presidential elections in the country were new, the mammoth corruption associated with them undermined citizen faith in democracy and the state. Elections for the national assembly and provincial councils dates back to the 1960s. The reestablishment of these bodies was similar to past efforts, as the national assembly had extremely weak authority vis-à-vis the executive. Provincial councils had no clear mandate to develop policy or check the authority of provincial governors, who just as before, were appointed by Kabul.

Public administration remained largely unaltered, with all subnational government officials beholden to ministries in Kabul. In the effort to create strong state capacity to deliver public services quickly to a neglected population, the centralized system of policy execution did not change.

This left the organization of the state almost exactly the same as it had decades before. What had changed, however, were citizens' expectations of their government. After decades of war, citizens were no longer content as subjects. Most policymakers and donors in Kabul seemed genuinely interested in helping the population, yet citizens at the local level continued to experience the state as subjects. They had no meaningful way to influence local policy or select their local governments. Without any local oversight or accountability, officials at the subnational level were free to engage in predatory behavior or simply ignore local concerns because they were living off of the rentier state.

The focus on state capacity and service delivery had several consequences. First, it led to colossal donor spending, which far exceeded local absorptive and monitoring capacity. This fed massive government corruption. The large influx of foreign aid also ensured Afghanistan would continue as a rentier

state—a state where the government depends on its revenue almost entirely from foreign assistance. As a result of these subsidies, the Afghan government continued to set priorities without significant input from citizens.

Second, efforts to rebuild the state strengthened the old centralized bureaucracy. Today, the systems of administration and subnational governance remain largely the same as during the height of Soviet influence in the 1980s, with all local governors appointed through murky processes in Kabul. Policy decisions continue to be made through systems of central planning through line ministries. Under this arrangement, decisions and budgets trickle down to provinces and districts, which give citizens and even the most reform-minded local official almost no input into the policy process. Unelected officials appointed by Kabul had little incentive to act on the behest of citizens in their provinces or districts.

Effective administrative capacity frequently emerged in spite of formal institutions. Some well-known “warlords” became effective governors precisely because they were able to ignore Kabul, creating their own rules. In my own research, I found that when district governors were from the districts they represented, which is surprisingly rare, they had more incentives to work on behalf of citizens, but “good” governors, too, crafted their own rules. Accountability and decentralization, which are constraints on the state, were inconsistent with the state-building mantra, which was that capacity and action were critical to winning hearts and minds.

Third, the quest for capacity resulted in what Matt Andrews, Lant Pritchett, and Michael Woolcock describe as “premature load bearing.” The government simply could not extend its scope quickly enough to satiate new demands that it created for itself with its ambitious plans. The result was that both donors and citizens began to work around the state. For example, the international community quickly realized that working through formal government channels would not lead to the rapid impact promised. Donors then created parallel governance structures in almost every sector to deal with the inability of the centralized bureaucracy to execute policy. This was true of both military and civilian assistance to Afghanistan. When donor support dried up, so too did these parallel structures, further undermining confidence in the state. The ministries that were most successful in delivering services often contracted international NGOs to implement service delivery to Afghan citizens. When donor funds faded, so too did much of this governance capacity.

Afghan citizens also worked around the state. The inability of the state to provide basic law and order meant that citizens continued to rely on informal, customary governance to solve disputes and provide some public goods. In my new book, *Informal Order and the State in Afghanistan*, I found that informal systems of governance were actually more responsive after 2001 than they had been in the past and that citizens had more confidence in them as governance organizations than the state for provision of many kinds of services. Citizens turned to them because they provided a bulwark of protection against an extractive state. However, customary governance did not fit neatly into capacity-building strategies. As a result, the formal process of state building

ignored an important area of governance capacity that has actually shown an impressive ability to provide public goods locally.

What are the lessons of Afghanistan for governance reform in fragile states? First, the drive for capacity can undermine efforts to rebuild persistently fragile states. Douglass North and Barry Weingast explain the problem of governance as creating a state strong enough to defeat those who challenge a monopoly on violence but not so strong as to undermine the economic institutions that build prosperity and political order. Afghanistan illustrates how a fragile state requires enough capacity to defeat insurgents, but enough constraints to discourage officials from predation and abuse. Unfortunately, well-crafted constraints often seem like an afterthought, as state-building efforts obsess with building quick capacity.

Second, capacity building can lead donors to choose quick fixes that reinforce old bureaucratic structures and path dependencies that may not be accountable to citizens. Donors are often going to take the path of least resistance and in many contexts, this will involve working through highly centralized administrative structures that precipitated state weakness to begin with.

Third, the drive for capacity can undermine weak states by asking them to do too much too quickly, causing them to collapse under their own weight. It also perpetuates rentier states in which political leaders are more or less free to do what they want because foreign aid removes the ability of the people to control how public funds are spent.

Although the international community is moving on to its next crisis, it will continue to be involved in state building. Many persistently fragile states around the world seem caught up in this vicious cycle of governance: Centralized predatory regimes spur state collapse only to be resurrected by donors seeking to build quick state capacity. In this way, state building unwittingly feeds into this cycle by creating new opportunities for unconstrained states to engage in plunder. It is critical to aim for sensitivity to these historical patterns and for a better balancing of capacity with effective constraints.

Reference

Fukuyama, Francis. 2013. "What Is Governance?" *Governance* 26, 3: 347–368.

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