

The rules of the game: towards a theory of networks of access

This briefing paper introduces a ‘networks of access’ approach to understanding political and economic life in Afghanistan, applying network analysis to political and economic dynamics. This framework has been developed from fieldwork conducted in Afghanistan since 2013. It differs from much of the literature on patrimonialism, warlordism and informal governance in Afghanistan in that it seeks to move away from the predominant focus on ‘corruption’ and hierarchical notions of patrimonialism towards a more nuanced, actor-based understanding of how power functions and how access to resources are governed. As Douglass North (1990) argued, rather than institutions constituting the ‘rules of the game’, it is the rules that govern networks that matter most. Policy implications are explored in the conclusion.

The post-Taliban state-building process began earnestly and with great optimism at the Bonn conference in 2001. At Bonn, the international community brought together a carefully selected group of Afghan stakeholders and created a new vision for the country’s future, premised on democratic governance, de-personalised state institutions and markets. Yet, even as the implementation of these ideals clashed with realities inside Afghanistan in the ensuing years, very few dared to question the rationale underpinning state-building and governance efforts. Fifteen years on from Bonn, Afghanistan is a ‘failed’ state.¹ The National Unity Government hinges on a highly contentious, precarious political settlement. State institutions at all levels are fragile and nepotistic, with tenuous links to the population and limited capacity to deliver security, governance or basic services. The government is heavily reliant on donor largesse and aid agency capacity to fulfil basic functions, including paying government salaries and providing basic services such as healthcare and education.

The perceived failure to establish a legitimate and functional government stems from a fundamental misunderstanding, from the outset of the international intervention, of how power is exercised and how access to resources are governed.² Afghanistan is not governed by impersonal institutions or formal rules, but is instead regulated

1 Employing Rotberg’s framework of failed, collapsed and weak states (Rotberg, 2003).

2 The definition of power employed here is borrowed from Castells (2000), defined as ‘the action of humans on other humans to impose their will on others, by the use, potential or actual, of symbolic or physical violence’.

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Credit: Ashley Jackson



The failure to establish a legitimate, functional government stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of how power is exercised and how access to resources are governed.

Networks of access: Afghanistan's 'networked state' not only includes 'traditional' power-holders such as elders but also new actors empowered through conflict and post-2001 international intervention

by relationship-based networks of access that produce and regulate power through the distribution of resources. These networks are complex, encompassing not only those seen as 'traditional' power-holders, such as elders, but also radically new actors empowered through the decades of conflict and, importantly, through the post-2001 international intervention. It is only by understanding how these networks function – the 'rules of the game' – that one can begin to understand political and economic life.

This briefing paper is the starting point for the elaboration of a framework to understand economic and political behaviour. This builds upon the rich political economy literature on Afghanistan, particularly the work of Sharan, who has explicitly positioned Afghanistan as a 'networked state' (Sharan, 2011; Sharan, forthcoming). It differs from Sharan in its application of network theory, drawing on systems analysis of the internet and new technologies, to introduce new frames of analysis for understanding governance, public goods and markets. Drawing upon field research conducted by the authors on the political and economic marketplaces in Nangarhar, Kandahar and Herat, this paper examines how networks of access function across Afghanistan, from the political elite to traders surviving on the margins of the economy. The first section outlines the theoretical framework, the second section seeks to apply it to Afghanistan, and the final section examines implications and areas for further inquiry.

Networks of access: towards a theoretical framework

Networks of access not only dominate the state and the economy in Afghanistan; they *constitute* the state and economy. Various overlapping and competing personality-

based networks are the key structures that regulate economic, social and political behaviour. In the networked state, actors and their actions are interdependent and personalised rather than independent, institution-based or autonomous. Actors within networks access power through connectivity (or relational ties). Connections are distributive, requiring access to or control over resources. Bargains and transactions, driven by mutual dependency, occur in a broader context of acute lack of trust and the absence of generalised trust (created and reinforced by the mistrust of institutions). Forms of identity (tribe, ethnicity, geographic identity and so on) strongly influence the patterning of connections, contra to ideas of impersonal Weberian state-building. While not overly determinative, these socio-cultural factors shore up mutual trust and play an important role in creating options for connectivity.

Those with the greatest connectivity across multiple networks are able to access the greatest power. However, the quality of connections matters. Granovetter's work (1983) on strong versus weak ties is useful in understanding how actors assemble their connections. Connections are reciprocal, meaning that they may be as constraining as they are enabling, depending on the expectation of compliance. The assemblage of connections that will maximise power varies according to the environment in which an actor operates and the actor's objectives. An actor with weaker connections is likely to be less constrained (but also less protected) than an actor with stronger ones. Strong connections come with strong obligations: they are likely to be combined with high expectations of a durable relationship, implying a high exit-cost. Weak connections imply weak obligations (often embodied by lower investment and a shorter time horizon) and

low expectations of compliance, but also agility. Diversifying relations by assembling an array of weak connections across multiple networks may allow an actor to spread risk in an uncertain environment. However, in more stable, predictable circumstances, an actor with a larger number of weak connections might hold less power or influence than the one with a smaller number of stronger ones.

Networks are not governed by hierarchical or rigid prescriptions but rather by boundaries and protocols. Borrowing from Galloway's framework for understanding actor behaviour within the realm of the internet (2004: 12), protocols are envisioned here as structuring the space within which action can be taken. Actors are not given a script per se or dictated to, but they are left to decide how best to navigate their constraints within the bounds of the understood protocol. This allows for actors to be both highly constrained and simultaneously highly autonomous in varying ways. These protocols are integral to the exercise of power; as Castells argues, power within networks 'is exercised not by exclusion from the networks but by the imposition of the rules of inclusion' (Castells, 2011). The content of the protocols, or 'rules of the game', is central, and is explored from the perspective of network actors in Afghanistan in the next section.

The rules of the game

Rule 1: Maximise your connectivity

Connectivity produces power by enabling access to resources. Behind actor behaviour, especially among high-level political and economic actors, is the drive to extend their power over as many spheres as they can, generating as much control over resources and redistributable income as possible. Major powerbrokers like Atta in the north or, in years past, Gul Agha Sherzai and Ahmed Wali Karzai in the south, seek to control resources for two main reasons: to build their networks (through patronage, which is the primary means of maximising their connectivity), and to close off opportunities to rivals or enemies. Nonetheless, as the trajectories of the three individuals mentioned above suggest, rivals may collaborate for a limited period of time if their interests overlap, then seek to undermine one another and, at a later date, cooperate and collude once again. The incentives to expand connectivity mean that networks are shape-shifting and mutable, expanding and contracting in response to internal and external factors.

Even less 'connected' actors or those with smaller-scale aims (e.g. seeking to secure a place at university or obtain a relative's release from jail) must maximise their connectivity to gain access to the necessary resources. In the economic marketplace, traders flourish or are marginalised according to their connections to political elites. Under certain conditions, bargaining power for actors with less influence can be created through a combination of strategic ties and external shifts. When Sherzai was appointed as governor of Nangarhar in 2004, he had to demonstrate his worth to the international forces by showing he could deliver on poppy eradication. Because he came from Kandahar and had no local constituency in the east, he turned largely to tribes and elders

neglected by his predecessors. These elders had newfound leverage to extract resources not only from Sherzai's network (informally) but also from the formal state (Jackson, 2014). More broadly, this is also true of elections whereby national power-holders are dependent on peripheral constituencies to deliver votes in order to fulfil bargains struck with other actors and extend their influence (Sharan, 2011).

Actors with less or limited connectivity are at a distinct disadvantage. They are more reliant on fewer actors, which limits their agility, and are ultimately less able to advocate for themselves. Minoia et al.'s work on vegetable traders in the eastern city of Jalalabad illustrates how only those with the 'right' ties can participate in the market, and the terms of their participation are dictated by the interests of those they depend on for access to the market (Minoia, Mumtaz and Pain, 2014). A small group of elites regulates market supply and collude with one another to manipulate onion prices. Links to former governor Sherzai enabled the creation of this cartel via formal state processes (e.g. licensing). Connections with Shezai's network enabled them to collude with border officials to manipulate border taxes and profit from the counter-seasonal trade from Pakistan. Farmers were powerless to negotiate better terms for themselves, while well-connected traders, backed by state officials, set the terms of trade.

Connectivity also matters because it is the only available means of protection in a volatile and uncertain environment. However, the terms 'trust' and 'protection' should be thought of in terms of the least amount of risk exposure. The Jalalabad farmers, in the example above, are forced to accept unfavourable terms, but the bargain struck with traders guarantees a degree of relative stability and predictability. More generally, the degree of trust available depends on the quality of the tie in question. The network acts much like a spider's web: where actor A and actor B enter into a bargain with one another, they are not only directly tied but also connected by secondary, tertiary and/or various indirect connections. If actor A defaults on commitments to actor B, the chances are that actor B will be able to exert pressure on actor A through family members, members of the same tribe or ethnicity, business associates, members of the district or provincial council or others with whom they have connections (or connections to connections). Often what counts as 'protection' is having enough information to know just how risky a certain action will be and to limit exposure to risk (i.e. having the means through your network to deal effectively with potential non-compliance).

Rule 2: All institutions are personal

Neither the economic marketplace nor institutions, government or otherwise, are impersonal. They do not exist above or beyond the reach of networks; rather, formal institutions and rules are subordinate to network protocols. In the networked state, institutions express network power and act in the interests of the networks that dominate them. State institutions are important because they are conduits for, and generate, resources. Key actors at the national level may



Predatory state: Though the street vendors of Kandahar rely on the police to enable their physical access to the bazaar, they see them as menacing rather than a source of protection

hold government positions, but their true power derives from outside the *de facto* state. Securing a role in government, through election or appointment, allowed now-influential individuals to achieve a degree of public-facing legitimacy but, more importantly, enabled their capture of state, non-state and international resources to shore up their network position. In the early years of the international intervention, cultivating close relations with international military forces (and, to a lesser extent, donors) was essential. Being a favoured governor of an insecure province assured access to military aid (often channelled to private militias or semi-formal security forces), military spending (through Provincial Reconstruction Teams and other military or military aid streams), a degree of control over aid projects and capture of border revenues.

At lower levels, actors embedded in state institutions generate resources through the provision of 'public' goods and basic services – for a price. For example, appointment to a civil service position often requires the payment of bribes. Similarly, a Provincial Council member might help resolve a dispute for a fee. However, a pre-existing tie is often required to access and negotiate these bargains. One must have a connection within the government to 'buy' a civil service position or a connection to a specific Provincial Council member in order to access their assistance.

State institutions, as expressions of power, can also be important arenas of contestation. The Provincial Council in Nangarhar under Sherzai provides an example of how different actor networks within the council, namely those allied to Sherzai and those allied to the rival network of the Arsala family (to which Sherzai's predecessor as governor

belonged), used the institution to contest or undermine one another. The Arsala network, led by then-council chair Jamal Qadir, levied political claims via the council in order to attack Sherzai, at one point even shutting down the council and denying entry to members. The undermining of his perceived control over the Provincial Council forced Sherzai into a weaker position and allowed the Arsalas to leverage their official positions to gain a greater hold over the province's resources (Jackson, 2014).

Because institutions are instrumentalised to further the interests of the powerful, they rarely act in the interests of those with little power to wield. Institutions often prey on, are problematic for or simply exclude many of those on the periphery of networks. The exclusion and harassment of certain networks has led to widespread resentment and provided fertile ground for the insurgency, particularly in the south. Nonetheless, even where state institutions act in predatory ways, there are patterns of bargaining. The street vendors of Kandahar city, for instance, rely on the police to enable their physical access to the bazaar. They see the government and the police as menacing, rather than a source of protection (although a degree of personal protection – largely *from* the police – can be gained by acting as a police informant) (Minoia and Pain, 2015).

Rule 3: Discount the future

The high levels of risk and volatility create short-term horizons. It is important to understand volatility as a *feature* of the networked landscape in Afghanistan. The system itself – the protocols and boundaries – appear relatively stable, even if the political, social and economic action they

govern is volatile. Where volatility is found within network behaviour, as exemplified by high levels of non-compliance or rapid expansion or contraction of network ties, it is a response to external shocks or uncertainty. Indeed, resorting to network diversification is a perceived safeguard against volatility. Specific incidents of volatility may be mistaken for actual structural change, but volatility is a structural feature and helps explain why even as political alliances and bargains change dramatically from week to week, the system ultimately functions in the same manner over many years.³

Actors are working with an existing knowledge of this volatility and the accompanying lack of protection from risk, so many adopt short-term horizons in response. Actors who have limited connectivity or are under stress have little choice but to accept the terms of engagement, as examples from the boom and bust in Kandahar's economy illustrate (see Minoia and Pain, 2015). Those who migrated from rural areas during the peak of the war economy, including those trading at its margins or those who benefitted from a trickle-down effect, were deeply affected by the drawdown of international forces, as were those who profited from lucrative contracts with the international forces. Each actor had to adapt their strategies to the stark and relatively rapid decline in resources in different ways.

Admittedly, as the epicentre of military activity and spending, Kandahar is an extreme example. Allowances must be made within the application of this theory for variances in volatility in network actor experience, and for the consequent behaviour of network actors (particularly with regard to trust levels and planning horizons). Preliminary comparisons reveal striking differences between relatively stable rural areas on the one hand, where ties may be far stronger (indicating that investing in long-term relationships may matter more), and urban centres and other contested or fragmented areas on the other.

One implication, supported by in-depth analysis of four of Afghanistan's five major urban centres (Nangarhar, Kandahar, Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif), is that there strong correlation between volatility and access to resources provided by or stemming from the international intervention. Nangarhar and Kandahar had much higher levels of volatility, as opposed to Herat and Mazar-i-Sharif, where expenditure and military presence were much lower. Volatility has arguably been sustained, amplified and/or created by the international community's own short-term vision for Afghanistan. This has manifested at the micro level in short (three- to nine-month) project cycles and an early reliance on quick impact projects, and at the macro level in the failure to meaningfully conceptualise the international intervention as a multi-decade project. Through the ways in which resource flows and timelines have been constructed since 2001, the international community has consistently incentivised political and economic short-termism.



Credit: Ashley Jackson

Dangers of exclusion: Lack of connectivity might result in a lack of protection and very real physical danger for an average Afghan in a rural village

Rule 4: Participation is mandatory

Non-cooperation in networks of access – or refusal to participate in patronage and nepotistic practices – comes with serious repercussions. The alternative is isolation and exclusion. For a political elite, exclusion means lack of access to revenue streams essential for maintaining their network and ultimately a loss of power. For a businessman in Mazar-i-Sharif, it might be the inability to import raw materials or export finished materials or even sell his goods in a local market. For an average Afghan in a rural village in Kandahar, lack of connectivity might result in a lack of protection and very real physical danger.

As such, many network actors are forced to make difficult choices that create moral conflict. One of the men interviewed in Kandahar, when speaking about the elections, said, 'If I vote for [an] honest person, I am sure he will not be able to resolve my problems. If the police take a member of my family, he will not be able to get them released ...Why would I vote for a person who will not be able to resolve my problems?' The candidate with more connections was valued over one seen as 'honest' or as having the technical qualifications to be in government. This is despite the fact that this interviewee, along with many other Afghans interviewed, was highly dissatisfied with the 'rules of the game'. There are niches of relatively greater autonomy and creative response to constraints – such as finding alternative outlets for trade, political manoeuvring within institutions and so on – but these are precarious, isolated and short-lived endeavours.

³ Alex de Waal (2014) surmises much the same with regard to the Horn of Africa.

Implications and areas for further inquiry

This briefing paper sketches a framework for understanding power and access to resources, but it does not do so in merely theoretical terms. Ultimately, it seeks to ensure that such a framework is policy-relevant. A primary issue is one of protocols or, more specifically, how to change the 'rules of the game'. Who writes, or gets to rewrite, the protocol, and how it evolves in response to internal or external factors, merits further examination. Similarly, the conditions under which creative responses to the rules and resistance to the prevailing order occur, and to what end, merit further exploration.

Second, the application of network theory emphasises the distributional dimensions of the Afghanistan economy as opposed to its productive parts. Those with connections and who have accumulated resources have more options, while those with less liquidity and access to opportunities will be forced to resort to increasingly high-risk coping strategies. Further analysis of the broader implications of how the decrease in resources impacts behaviour across the wider spectrum of actors could help flesh out the incentives and disincentives for various behaviours.

Finally, the 'rules of the game' help explain why technocratic approaches have performed so poorly in Afghanistan – and indeed in other fragile contexts. Investing in institutions makes little sense if these institutions are largely expressions of closed systems of access. It provides insufficient incentives to create the kind of behaviour change necessary for the desired outcomes. The approaches taken have ultimately asked network actors to act against their own (short-term) interests and to ignore the rules of the game at great potential personal cost – for little potential benefit. Approaches that focus on, for example, strengthening value chains are likely to have a limited rather than a transformative effect. While a given road or cold-

chain mechanism may yield some positive benefits, such measures will always benefit some actors more than others and are vulnerable to manipulation if implemented without regard to the network dynamics at play.

Ultimately, the international community's starting assumptions were deeply flawed and led to largely ineffectual or sub-optimal interventions. This problem is not unique to Afghanistan. So what would work better? At a minimum, a long-term, cohesive vision for the future and an understanding of how networks function to better inform engagement is required, ensuring that this engagement extends not only to those networks that dominate the state but to those that have been excluded and groups on the periphery of these networks. Unfortunately, there is no simple or linear alternative model that arises from this analysis. Rather, the 'rules of the game' challenge policy-makers to think differently about how they design programmes, allocate resources and discourage or encourage certain political and economic behaviours.

Since 2001, the international community has consistently incentivised political and economic short-termism.

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