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Many *Shuras* Do Not a Government Make: International Community Engagement with Local Councils in Afghanistan

“Without the international community’s and the Afghan government’s implementation of a coherent vision for local governance in Afghanistan, local politics will likely remain volatile, with some councils even serving as destabilizing forces. However, such a coherent vision can be developed by acquiring local knowledge, forging strong relationships between informal leaders and government officials, and by focusing on a much smaller number of local *shuras* that are seen as legitimate and truly representative in their respective areas.”

Summary

- The need to engage local Afghan leaders and support community decision making has recently been promoted as a key element of both development and counterinsurgency strategies in Afghanistan.
- The resulting proliferation of community councils—commonly called *shuras* or *jirgas*—sponsored by different actors within the Afghan government and international community has decreased the effectiveness of local governance and rule of law in many places.
- Traditional Afghan dispute resolution and governance bodies are most effective when they are formed by local residents and genuinely reflect the interests of the community. Their legitimacy decreases if international or government sponsors create *shuras* or *jirgas* to promote their own interests.
- This paradox creates a dilemma for programs designed to foster good governance: how to promote community self-rule that reflects traditional values and mechanisms and that develop locally, while adhering to rigid counterinsurgency and development timelines and strategies.
- These so-called ‘traditional’ political structures have an important place in local governance in Afghanistan, but the international community should not assume that such bodies fairly represent their respective communities. Rather, sound understanding of local dynamics and in-depth consultation with local government actors and community leaders are necessary to help ensure that such bodies are represented and thus, legitimate within the community.
- A more coherent, sustainable vision of long-term local governance and coordinated strategies between the Afghan government and international forces is necessary to bring both stability and development to Afghanistan. In particular, this Peace Brief supports the attempts to create a coherent long-term goal of local governance based on legitimate local actors, most likely selected through elections.

Shuras and Local Governance in Afghanistan

The Arabic word *shura* is generally translated into English as ‘consultation.’ A *shura* is a ubiquitous institution involving local politics in Afghanistan.¹ The word is often translated simply as ‘council’

and generally implies a political gathering, usually of men, that represents all groups in an area. In practice, *shuras* are amorphous entities, often changing from area to area, with the tendency to break down and reorganize quickly. The shifting nature of these political bodies has rarely been addressed² and the recent focus on these bodies as a point of engagement between local leaders, the Afghan government and international forces has in some cases been problematic.³

Ideally, *shuras* are councils of respected leaders which represent the political groups within a given community. *Shuras* are found at both the village and district level in much of Afghanistan. Despite the presence of *shuras* in many districts, they are shaped and operated in different ways. Other *shuras* are smaller and have specific functions, such as *khwakhogai shuras* or 'sympathy' *shuras* in the east of Afghanistan which organize funds for funerals and other ceremonies for poor residents. Most of the Afghan government and international community's recent focus on *shuras* has been on village or district level *shuras* which have traditionally addressed a wide range of issues from questions of local governance to dispute resolution. A *shura's* authority rests on the legitimacy of its members, and whether it represents the community. In many areas, *shuras* continue to play an important and stabilizing role in local governance, dispute resolution and political negotiations.

This Peace Brief suggests that *shuras* and other 'traditional'⁴ bodies have the potential to strengthen local governance in Afghanistan, but the current strategy of *shura*-creation and promotion has generally undermined local governance in the short term. A large number of these councils have been set up with little coordination, resulting in increasingly complex local political situations. Actors on all sides take advantage of the ambiguities created by multiple councils, when customarily there would likely have been only one. The power of each new or specialized *shura* created to address a particular development or security need results in the inefficient use of funds and weakened local governance structures. Without the international community's and the Afghan government's implementation of a coherent vision for local governance in Afghanistan, local politics will likely remain volatile, with some councils even serving as destabilizing forces. However, such a coherent vision can be developed by acquiring local knowledge, forging strong relationships between informal leaders and government officials, and by focusing on a much smaller number of local *shuras* that are seen as legitimate and truly representative in their respective areas.

Shuras and Stability

Despite their traditional roles, a combination of poor security, forced displacement, targeted assassination and local corruption has eroded the functioning of *shuras* in many areas of Afghanistan in the past decades. Likewise, the international community's increased focus on *shuras* as a means for creating stability and delivering economic funds has in some cases actually destabilized areas.

In many areas, particularly where the international community and Afghan government have a limited presence, district councils have more concentrated authority that can be key to local stabilization programs. A formalized relationship between the central government and locals increases the strength of the local council by highlighting to the community their ability to access government and international funds. At the same time, it also allows the district governor the ability to ensure that such councils fairly represent the people of the district. Success relies on the personalities of the actors involved. This relationship works best when figures such as the provincial governor and district governor are uncorrupt and have sound knowledge of the politics of the area. For example, one district council in Kunar province approached the provincial governor to ratify its authority in order to increase its legitimacy within the community. The council saw the importance of creating a formal link with the government as a way to increase stability

and generate future development projects in the area. The governor had asked the community to send representatives from each political group in the community. The governor, who is from a neighboring province and has several years experience in Kunar, refused to acknowledge the body until it had done this effectively.

While this example represents the *shura* in its ideal form, it is also possible for local commanders or groups to co-opt and corrupt local councils through bribery or intimidation. In such cases, the council is usually de-legitimized in the eyes of local residents and generally, it is only when such corrupted councils are sustained by outside resources (e.g., government or military funds, revenue from the narcotics trade, etc.) that they continue to maintain authority in the community. In another less destabilizing but still troubling example, development projects are undermined when local leaders establish *shuras* and claim they are representative of the local community in order to secure international reconstruction funds. These leaders often collect these donations for their own purposes and to distribute to their own constituents. International groups are often still quick to partner with and fund groups because of their perceived legitimacy. This funding practice has resulted in the increasing number of nongovernmental groups in urban centers, such as Kabul, claiming to represent “the people.”

The International Community and Community *Shuras*

International involvement in Afghanistan has complicated local governance issues, as evident in the role of *shuras* in local politics. For example, the recent influx of cash through development projects, and the related attempts to use local councils as consultative bodies on the selection and design of these projects, has created serious tensions in some areas. In the city of Jalalabad—where USIP has a pilot project focusing on traditional dispute resolution mechanisms—community development councils (CDCs) set up under the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development’s National Solidarity Program (NSP) often compete directly with local mosque and neighborhood *shuras*. These groups are often composed of overlapping groups of elders, all struggling for influence and resources.

More alarmingly, work by the Afghan government and international community has disrupted and distorted local political processes. Military negotiations with tribal elders have in some places incited violence between local groups, particularly when groups feel as if funds and power are not being distributed equitably. This was particularly true regarding an attempt to purchase the loyalty of the Shinwar tribe in Nangarhar earlier this year. The attempt triggered violence within the Shinwari tribe and with neighbors who felt that they had not been represented at meetings between the military and tribal elders—despite best efforts by the U.S. military to ensure that all groups were represented among the 130 elders at the meeting where the deal was announced.⁵ While military officials assumed the large gathering of local elders legitimized the deal, many in the tribe still felt unrepresented or not adequately compensated.

Nevertheless, the international military relies on meetings with local *shuras* to address local concerns and ‘win hearts and minds.’ Such community consultations can be effective. For example, in some cases, reintegration *shuras* established to transfer International Security Assistance (ISAF) detainees to communities appear to have been successful in the short term thus far. However, too often internationally summoned *shuras* can become at best simple displays of force and at worst, they can disrupt local political balances, putting lives at danger. For example, journalist Anne Marlowe recently detailed futile attempts by the U.S. military to prop up unpopular Afghan government officials in Zabul at a *shura* between dozens of U.S. and Afghan military officials, the governor and 19 local elders.⁶ In another case, U.S. Marines in Helmand claimed to have held

'teenage *shuras*,' despite the importance Afghans place on the role of elders in local governance.⁷ Even stories once heralded by the military as successes, such as the approach outlined by U.S. Army Major Jim Gant in "One Tribe at a Time,"⁸ have often been met with criticism upon more thorough evaluations.⁹ By working with 'one tribe at a time,' it is extremely difficult not to marginalize and exclude others, and recent strategies have not involved enough coordination between the national government and international organizations to ensure an inclusive, coherent approach.¹⁰ Additionally, local *shuras* gain and lose legitimacy based upon their ability to represent the community and deliver resources equitably. Another current problem is that these approaches continue to sustain groups that the community would often otherwise view as illegitimate. This exacerbates corruption and inequitable access to political and economic power, thus potentially destabilizing an area.

An array of ongoing or planned programs continues to intensify some existing challenges to coherent local governance. For example, the National Solidarity Program (NSP) has set up 22,490 community councils in 35,200 villages to administer World Bank funded development projects.¹¹ At the same time, under the Afghanistan Social Outreach Program (ASOP), there are plans to establish district level *shuras* in 100 districts (up from just a handful of districts to date), each of which will have their own security, development and justice subcommittees. Meanwhile, recent proposals emanating from the June 2010 Peace *Jirga* and the July 2010 Kabul Conference suggested new provincial and district level reintegration councils should be established, in the hopes of convincing insurgents to stop fighting. In addition, Provincial Reconstruction Teams and district level military units continue to set up community councils of "elders" and other respected leaders in an attempt to get increased local acceptance of their activities in the area.

While there are some positive features in the initiatives mentioned above, the large number of existing and planned councils, both indigenous and externally imposed, distorts local political incentives. The lack of a clearly defined authority allows local actors to act without accountability, take advantage of their positions and play international groups and the military off of one another, taking advantage of what one official from the European Union Police Mission in Afghanistan (EUPOL) recently called "competitive programming among donors." Moreover, overlapping roles among some of the councils leads to confusion among donors and beneficiaries alike.

A better approach would be for the international community to support a coherent approach to local governance. A plan which would work with the Afghan government to identify, strengthen and work with local groups that fairly represent the community. This means conducting research, partnering with local organizations and potentially increasing communication between international military and aid groups.¹² At the same time, more attention should be paid to provincial and district governors, and their ability work with local communities; a sound understanding of the personalities involved is pertinent. The international community can strengthen the positions of these figures by working more closely with them and simultaneously holding them more accountable to both the national government and local communities through the promotion of transparent interaction.

How Lack of Coherence and International Programs May Weaken Local Political Structures and Governance

- Too many *shuras* dilute the power of their members, fracturing political power in many areas, while making these councils less effective at some of their traditional roles, such as in dispute resolution.

- By funding programs that rely on a variety of councils, often without local government consultation, the international community may actually incentivize further divisions among the councils and may create parallel government structures.
- Despite some assumptions by members of the international community, the existence of a local council does not automatically imply its legitimacy to the local community. Any group of elders is not necessarily a representative *shura*. Numerous examples also exist of the international community relying too heavily on certain local councils that are not actually representative of an entire area, thereby exacerbating tensions by excluding certain groups.
- Membership in some *shuras* which are perceived as having international ties can also be dangerous, with the Taliban having assassinated several members of internationally-sponsored *shuras* in the south. Singling out certain leaders puts them in danger, risking long-term leadership in the country.

Key Recommendations

- When beginning new projects, the international community needs to conduct more research on local political structures to determine what types of bodies already exist.
- Instead of setting up new councils, the Afghan government and international actors should work with existing councils, striving to make them as representative and effective as possible, avoiding duplication among the councils.
- Provincial and district governors can play an important role in identifying and linking with legitimate representational political bodies. At the same time, the Afghan government and international community should hold the governors more accountable by monitoring for corruption, creating incentive programs, promoting transparency, etc.
- In the longer term, the international community should support calls for district council elections as outlined in the Afghan constitution. Numerous and serious logistical and political issues need to be addressed before such elections can reasonably occur (including the defining of district boundaries and conducting a national census). Once locally-elected government *shuras* are established there will be less need for overlapping bodies that could confuse jurisdiction. This would be a key step in establishing stable long-term local governance across Afghanistan.

Endnotes

1. *Jirga*, a word that is used in Afghanistan primarily by Pashto speakers, is sometimes used interchangeably with the word *shura*, but more accurately refers to ad hoc groups meeting to discuss a specific issue, hence the recent 'Peace *Jirga*' hosted by President Karzai specifically to address reconciliation with the Taliban.
2. An exception to this is Chris Johnson and Jolyon Leslie, 2008, *Afghanistan: The Mirage of Peace*, Zed Books, 41-42. Johnson and Leslie point out the relationship between the growth of bodies labeled as *shuras* and the increase engagement with international organizations, who prefer to engage with such 'representative' bodies.
3. Anne Marlowe in *The New Republic* refers to this as 'the *shura* strategy.'
4. The word 'traditional' is highly problematic since it is questionable how long some of these institutions have actually existed in Afghanistan and the clear ways in which they adapt to manipulate international aid and the external intervention in very modern ways. This has created a wider debate over the international community's understanding of many terms such as tribe and *arbaki*.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

The authors work in the Kabul office of the United States Institute of Peace on local governance and rule of law projects that help communities resolve conflict, increase access to justice and promote rule of law. Shahmahmood Miakhel is USIP's country director in Afghanistan. From 2003 to 2005, he was Afghanistan's deputy minister of the interior. Additionally, he has worked for the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, the U.N. Development Program and the U.N. Office for Project Service. Noah Coburn is a political anthropologist focusing on informal justice at USIP's office in Kabul. He has been conducting research on violence and local political structures in Afghanistan since 2005. This report is based upon observations by the two authors, field visits to the south, east, southeast, west and center of the country, as well as discussions with hundreds of local government officials, local leaders and members of the international community.



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See for example this Peace Brief and Masood Karakhail and Susanne Schmeidl, 2006, 'Integration of Traditional Structures into the State-Building Process: Lessons from the Tribal Liaison Office in Loya Paktia,' in Publication Series on Promoting Democracy under Conditions of State Fragility, issue 1: Afghanistan, Berlin: Heinrich Boll Foundation. Lessons from the Tribal Liaison Office in Loya Paktia,' in Publication Series on Promoting Democracy under Conditions of State Fragility, issue 1: Afghanistan, Berlin: Heinrich Boll Foundation.

5. See Joshua Partlow and Greg Jaffe. "U.S. Military Runs into Afghan Tribal Politics after Deal with Pashtuns." *The Washington Post*, May 10, 2010.
6. Anne Marlowe. "Shura to Fail: Why U.S. Officials Taking Tea with Local Afghan Leaders Seem to be Wasting their Time." *The New Republic*, May 13, 2010.
7. "Marines Host 'Shura' to Address Afghan Needs." DoD Live, September 23, 2008.
8. Jim Grant. "One Tribe at a Time: A Strategy for Success in Afghanistan," second edition. Nine Sisters Imports, Inc., December 2009.
9. See for example Michael Daxner, "We are One Tribe—and Live in the Society of Intervention," Afghanistan Analysts Network and "Petraeus and McChrystal Drink Major Gant's Snake Oil," January 18, 2010, The Ghosts of Alexander, www.easterncampaign.wordpress.com.
10. Somewhat reassuringly, in July and August 2010 meetings that USIP attended with U.S. Special Forces in Kabul, the approach of "one tribe at a time" as advocated by Gant was dismissed by U.S. commanders as no longer part of their tactical planning—at least when designing programs like the village stabilization program (also known as the local defense initiative)—given the likelihood of marginalizing other tribal groups.
11. World Bank Report No.AB5745, March 25, 2010. There are planned expansions of NSP and their development councils.
12. Note, however, that many aid groups shun increased interaction with the military for fear of being seen as partial to the foreign military intervention in the country. Thus, the military must accept the fact that members of the aid community may want to distance themselves from rather than increase communication with the foreign forces. The military cannot compromise the safety and independence of nongovernmental organizations who wish to maintain at arms' length from them.
13. See for example, Alissa Rubin, "Taliban Slay Elders over Aid Money." *The New York Times*, May 25, 2010.