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WHO GOVERNS KABUL? EXPLAINING URBAN POLITICS IN A POST-WAR CAPITAL CITY

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Who Governs Kabul? Explaining Urban Politics in a Post-War Capital City

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Abstract

Amid intensifying international interconnectedness and simultaneous assertions that cities are positioned to supersede national governance, capital cities constitute collision points between political control and exclusion, wealth and poverty, as well as tradition and modernity. The ever-growing importance of cities as centres of political and economic power and as resources in developing countries is also increasingly prompting contenders to concentrate both peaceful and violent political campaigns in spaces of urban primacy. However, ensuing city-centred struggles are not only about resources and access to power but also take issue with the meanings and functions of the nation as a whole.

It is argued that the result of such multi-layered conflicts in capital cities produce a kind of 'over-determination' of political deliberation, putting additional weight on already ambitious urban development and governance agendas. This is especially true in post-war capital cities, where resulting 'sovereign conflicts' at the fault lines of local, national and international institutions shape political and economic agendas in and for post-war capital cities. Supercharged with donor monies and reconstruction machineries, these cities once again become highly politicised arenas characterised by discrepancies in political as well as economic leverage among different stakeholders. Defying official language, they are governed neither exclusively locally nor jointly by local and national entities, but in fact via ad hoc axes of governance that revolve around shared short-term incentives and interests of national and international actors.

Comparing recent politics and policies with historical data, this paper shows that in post-war Kabul it is the national-international axis that has the greatest influence over the formulation of policies geared toward alterations of existing institutions within the urban realm, excluding local interests and priorities. This constitutes a stark change compared to politics in Kabul prior to the Russian occupation and before, when the main fault lines of urban conflict ran between rivalling tribal and ethnic interests. Conversely, policymaking after 2001 has been even more concentrated 'above the heads' of the city's residents. This neglect of de facto equitable urban development serves to reinvigorate existing trigger factors of violent conflict in the urban realm, such as restricted public access to local policymaking and the urban land market, high rates of youth unemployment and poor urban services.

Preventing 'over-determined' cities from inciting renewed large-scale violence therefore necessitates context-specific analyses of urban histories and their particular interfaces with the political economies of state creation and consolidation. Moreover, it requires candid assessments of opportunities as well as limitations of constructive political engagement at the city level as a decisive arena for brokering peace in developing countries.

Cities, conflict and post-war urban governance: a symbiosis

Anthony Giddens (1984: 143-197; cf. Gurr and King 1987: 28) has famously attributed the rise of the bureaucratic state to the development of capitalist-industrialist cities as the expression of a centralisation of resources¹ that accelerated ‘time-space distancing’² and shifted the relationship between city and countryside from disciplinary power exerted on rural folk by city-based elites towards the commodification of time (labour) and space (physical capital) that cuts across geography yet bundles economic *dirigisme* in urban centres. While the alteration of rural institutions was not an objective, their gradual penetration was a side effect of capitalist polity.

We should note that it was precisely the growth of cities that gave rise to the commercialisation of agriculture, through the provision of services and financial capital, that either enabled additional cultivation or increased technical capabilities to push efficiency (Bates 2001: 53). This has created such vigour that at a global scale, the ‘growing role of cities in economic and political affairs is suggestive that ‘the local’ may be more important in governance broadly’, as Rowlands (2001: 147) observes. Post and Baud (2002) even suggest that cities and city governments are the new ‘state space’, well positioned to supersede national spheres of governance.

In addition to the commoditisation of labour and capital, security is the other essential constitutive element of city formation. Yet their very features have also made cities targets. Whereas cities have thus always been part of battlefields of war, they are now the primary space in which wars are taking place (Graham 2004; Legault 2000). This observation clearly substantiates related claims that war as a spatial and also political phenomenon has become urbanised (Beall 2006; Graham 2006; Enzensberger 1993). Philosopher Paul Virilio (2004: 3) even speaks of a ‘hyperconcentrated post-modern war – from military battlefields of the past to a strategy against cities’.³ The July bombings in London, the attacks on public transport in Madrid and Mumbai, the urban riots all over France: these come as stark reminders of his trend.

This development is by no means confined to highly industrialised countries. Contemporary armed conflicts taking place outside urban areas in developing countries nevertheless catalyse the rapid growth of poorer urban neighbourhoods and increase the pressure on urban services and infrastructure. Not only are urban residents facing a key feature of this ‘urban penalty’ (UN Habitat 2006): policymakers and planners as well see themselves confronted with challenging dilemmas. Yet confusion persists on how to address them. Grünewald (2004: 362) remarks in a recent study that ‘humanitarian actors are conscious of the complex functioning of the city, but they do not have profound knowledge of this environment. [...] Humanitarian organisations today are still too little inclined to open themselves to new types of expertise, the only real keys to the challenge and stake that the city in conflict represents’.⁴

Recent international reconstruction efforts in war zones in developing regions have paid little attention to the urban dimension of conflicts, thus leaving unexplored possible causations running between urban policy, urban social reality and violent conflict. What is more, in

¹ Giddens focuses on the urban as a ‘storage container’ of administrative resources (1984: 183).

² In other words, the historical duration cementing institutional rigidity

³ Author’s translation.

⁴ Author’s translation.

international legal practice the control of the capital city continues to be equated with holding sovereign power (Walter 2002: 50). At the same time, what could be called the dark side of globalisation further encourages sub-national rulers who seek to rule something ‘less than a national state’ (Herbst 2004: 305). This ‘something less than a national state’ could well be the cities connected to resource-rich areas of the country. Hence civil wars, as the most salient expression of warfare in the present time, have a crucial urban dimension not only regarding social losses, but also with respect to creating challenges and alterations to local polity. It is in this context that light needs to be shed on the processes of governance that occur in crisis and conflict cities at different levels (Beall 2008). The following historical review of city politics in and on Kabul provides an excellent opportunity to investigate several facets of this challenge.

Kabul in historical perspective: the genesis of over-determination

Early centrism and dispersion

Pekharke ahlee wa pa ghre ke yaghi. (Pushtun proverb)
‘Be tame in the city, rebellious in the mountains’.

The history of Afghanistan has been shaped fundamentally by ebbs and flows of centralisation, which was dominant during the reign of Amir Abdur Rahman Khan (1880-1901), during the communist government (1979-1992) and the Taleban period (1996-2000), even though the latter were committed to an anti-urban agenda. Conversely, ‘the second model’ of national governance was characterised by the priority of modernising the state apparatus in Kabul during the intermediate Habibullah and Amanullah governments (1901-1929), and to a lesser extent also during the royal government of Zahir Shah (1933-1973). These regimes all displayed expenditure patterns substantiating an urban bias towards ‘building a modern state sector in Kabul that bypassed the rural power holders, leaving them with a large measure of local autonomy’ (Johnson and Leslie 2004: 139). This spatial imbalance went hand in hand with the beginning ‘tribalisation’ of the state (Shahrani 2001; cf. Lake and Harrison 1990), namely the co-optation of tribal leaders into central structures in order to lessen tribal pressures on the administrative apparatus and to gradually detribalise society. As early as 1932 the fight of the central powers with territorial powers was labelled the ‘red thread’ of Afghan history (Schwager 1932: 34;) and Thier and Chopra (2002: 895) have reiterated this observation seventy years later.

Ethno-spatially, Kabul lies on the border between Tajik, Pashtun, and Hazara regions. Hence to exert political power ethnic strongmen had to leave their turf and venture into the blurred boundary. Thus anyone that could hold Kabul also proved that they had, to some extent, wider legitimacy outside their own regions. As Adamec (1996: 129) has put it, ‘To be recognized as a ruler of Afghanistan, one had to be in possession of the town [Kabul]’. Similarly, Giustozzi (2003: 6-7) remarks about the country’s more recent history of national politics as a fight for the capital,

‘While it may appear odd that the capital of a collapsed state could be the object of much desire, everybody has always been aware that whoever is in control of Kabul will be better positioned to claim international recognition and receive a greater share of power in the event of a settlement’.

Despite its religious diversity, which included Hindus, Jews, Armenians, and Sikhs, Kabul was also a centre of recruitment of Muslim warriors recruited by the ruler of the era, Dost Mohammed, for his military campaigns against Sikh tribes in the east. These were wrapped in a religious discourse yet motivated primarily by the political objective of securing a cohesive sphere of influence. Yet continuing ethnic factional fighting and futile attempts of the central government to subjugate neighbouring tribes had stark consequences for the fiscal health of the national *cum* municipal government, thus also impacting on the city's development (Shahrani 1986: 35-36). As a result, much of Kabul's physical infrastructure was degenerating (Masson 1842: 264, 289). On top of this decline and unlike other Afghan cities such as Kandahar and Herat, Kabul also became the target of colonial forces, enduring two sieges and conquests by the British Hindu army, with the second attack causing widespread destruction and leaving the city to the looting and pillaging by urban gangs of what was left after the British forces had retreated (Canfield 1986: 76).

The first and second invasions

Lord Auckland had conquered the capital city on 7 August 1839 precisely with the objective of expelling Mohammed Dost and replacing him with one of his fiercest rivals, Shah Shoujah. After enjoying a colonial lifestyle maintained through massive imports of luxury goods – commentators noted that both officers and soldiers were ‘all looking uncommonly fat’ (Macrory 1966: 124) – the urban population rose up and expelled the expedition force from Kabul. Legend has it that all but one soldier got massacred on their way across the Khyber Pass in January 1842. British troops stationed in colonial India embarked on a bloody revenge mission, taking Kabul in days, killing hundreds of suspected insurgents, and destroying the bazaar and razing some of the city's most outstanding architectural heritage.

The occupation of Kabul during the second Anglo-Afghan war was brief, but equally bloody. After the Indian Army had initially conquered Kabul in the twinkling of an eye in May 1879, an armed uprising drove out the British only four months later. Yet the invaders regrouped outside the city and attacked the rioters, defeating them in a swift battle. The British then declared martial law and imposed heavy fines on the citizens. The death penalty was also used frequently, and those accused of having led the riots were hung publicly. By December, the mob rose again and forced the British into the Sherpur bastion, from where they launched a successful counter attack. However from then on the army ‘governed’ from the bastion rather than from municipal buildings, with their forces having been diminished substantially and survivors branded with ‘a scare which has never been entirely shaken off’, having to watch quiescently when urban gangs inflicted major plundering on the city and, in early 1880, beginning to ponder an organised retreat from Kabul (Adamec 1996: 206, cf. Roberts 2002: 18-19). Not only these early invasions but also the mode of ‘remote governance’ strikingly foreshadow contemporary developments in Afghanistan and how they relate to urban resilience and crisis as a function of national strife.

Expanding the nation from the centre

Abdur Rahman Khan, who had taken over leadership over the Afghan territory in 1880, emulated his predecessor's stance towards establishing Kabul as the political and physical centre of the nation. He did so at the expense of the economic and administrative development of most of the other provincial centres, and the countryside at large. Indeed, he combined the reconstruction of the Afghan administrative apparatus with the concentration of executive power in his own hands (Kakar 1979: 135, 224; Gregorian 1969: 160; Ghobar 1967: 343-344). Abdur Rahman also split up the provinces into smaller units so as to weaken

provincial tribal authorities and enlarge Kabul Province, which remained under his direct rule, to the extent that it also included remote areas such as Uruzgan and Kafirstan, thus making Kabul Province ‘virtually a kingdom in itself’ (Kakar 1979: 48-49).

Abdur Rahman decreed that provincial expenses had to be covered with local revenues, but surpluses had to be forwarded annually to the centre and newly appointed provincial officials had to report regularly to Kabul and wait for ordinances. Personal initiative on the part of provincial officials was explicitly discouraged and they were treated internally, receiving instructions on even the most trivial matters of administrative concern or personal appearance. Abdur Rahman also reorganised local administration in the cities by introducing government appointed officials (*kotwals*) and elected representatives (*kalantars*), which were then approved and appointed for life. He endowed the latter with far-reaching duties to guarantee civic order (Kakar 1979: 53-54). While Abdur Rahman thus initiated a new period in Afghanistan’s history of urbanisation to the concentration of political power in the city, this consolidation was not translated into an active policy of urban development, which was only adopted during the 1920s (Grötzbach 1979: 14).

Abdur Rahman followed political centralisation with a strong commitment to economic nationalism and widespread nationalisation of larger firms. This had a detrimental effect not only on the country as a whole, whose borders became fully demarcated under Abdur Rahman, but also on existing urban economies, including that of Kabul. This rapid worsening of the urban business environment dovetailed due to the falling purchasing power of urban residents who were suffering under sharply increased government dues and fees and the restriction of foreign imports following Abdur Rahman’s order, who was convinced that trade and the involvement of foreign merchants would only serve to impoverish the kingdom via monetary outflows and remittances (Kakar 1979: 205-212). Abdur Rahman’s nationalist and monopolist policies were only abolished upon his death when his son Habibullah Khan took over the crown in 1901, leaving behind a central bureaucracy that did not extend much beyond the capital city and that maintained social order mainly through the threat of force but also formed the basis of an emerging class of urban intellectuals (Grevemeyer 1990: 167-168, Rubin 1988: 1195; Kakar 1979: 209).

In 1901 when Habibullah took over from his father to continue his centralist legacy, Kabul was already more than an old town stretching along the Kabul River, where some structures have survived from the early previous century. Numerous newer neighbourhoods had developed, forming the second and the third districts. Habibullah favoured modern European architecture, and villas became the most frequent middle and upper class housing style. This stood in stark contrast to the poverty outside urban centres and, crucially, also constituted an additional friction between the modern and the traditional, this time in the realm of architectural design and its implications for privacy and the central role of religion in private life.

Habibullah’s son Amanullah subsequently seized the throne in 1919 after Habibullah had been murdered during a hunting excursion. A brief diplomatic conflict with the British rulers in India and the aforementioned air raid on Kabul and Jalalabad rendered Afghanistan fully independent, and Amanullah was fully determined to, finally, make Kabul the capital worthy of a proud nation. Unlike his grandfather Abdur Rahman, Amanullah had been ‘born and raised in Kabul city and had virtually no contact with tribal Afghanistan’ (Rubin 2002: 57). His development agenda was radical, with stark consequences for Kabul as a political as well as socio-cultural arena. Aided financially by loans from European state banks, Amanullah

tried to tackle simultaneously land reform, tax harmonisation, infrastructure investments, and the improvement of schooling ratios. All four culminated in the subsequent declaration of the first Afghan Constitution in 1921 (Rubin 2002: 54; Johnson and Leslie 2004: 138-139; Grevemeyer 1990: 103-104). In 1921, Amanullah's government initiated the institutional creation of a municipal administration in Kabul (*Baladieh*, after 1964 *Sharwali*, cf. Viaro 2004: 154) based on existing staff working in a small office (*Safaie*) who had been supervising urban cleaning since its inauguration under Amir Shear Ali Khan (1859-1868).⁵ Unlike its direct involvement in public cleaning and sprinkling, the office had also been collecting municipal taxes through an indirect system of appointed *wakil-e-gozars* ('neighbourhood advocates') who were required to deliver their collections on a daily basis.

Three years later, a municipal law was passed that foresaw the establishment of fourteen elected municipal councils across the country, mandating that elected members had to be literate, that the electorate had to register prior to elections, which were to take place in mosques, and prohibiting the appointment of more than one male family member per election period vote (Yavari d'Hellencourt et al. 2003: 7-8). The subsidiary principle was introduced as well, as a tool of local governance, and cities were entitled to a share of provincial revenues, which previously had to be forwarded in their entirety to the central government, as explained above. This occurred even though unmet municipal expenses still depended on approval by the Prime Minister, a situation that was a constant feature of municipal finance in Kabul where public expenses regularly outweighed public incomes. This thus formally strengthened the politico-economic leverage of national institutions over the capital city.⁶

Afghan cities can thus be considered the first and only spaces of experimental democracy in recent Afghan history (Grevemeyer 1990: 237-238, cf. 391 fn. 74; Hondrich 1966: 226; Dupree 1963 in Grevemeyer 1990: 241). Indeed, had the institutional framework been followed, the impact of democratically governed cities could not be overestimated. This was both in light of the growth of urban centres since the 1920s and also the structural function that they played in transforming an exclusively agrarian society into a centrally administered polity (Grötzbach 1979: 31-33).

However, facilitated by widespread ignorance among urban residents about the constitutional changes pertaining to the urban realm, political practice in Afghan cities continued being marked by disregard of democratic principles. Electoral processes were replaced and central government-friendly local leaders were installed by national power brokers. The nominal creation of democratic spaces in Afghan cities was thus overshadowed by the role and importance of the latter in forging a cohesive national state. In other words, national interests could not tolerate losing control of ever-growing cities, not least because of the modernisation agenda that gave central stage to urban production.

Another important factor in the failure of democracy was the tribal composition of urban government in Kabul at the time. Pushtuns were the dominant group in local and national administration, while Tajiks as well as Uzbeks and Hazaras remained underrepresented. Similarly, in the evolving middle class of officials, Pushtuns and Muhammadzais were by far the most dominant groups, constituting what Rubin calls 'a bureaucratic class that lived (or

⁵ Yavari d'Hellencourt et al. (2003: 7) contend that the renaming took effect much later, namely under Zahir Shah in 1964, when it was mentioned in the new constitution. I have not been able to verify this.

⁶ Grötzbach (1979) points out that the creation of Kabul Municipality preceded other comparable institutions in the country "roughly by a decade." Here, a systematic introduction of municipal administration is credited to Amanullah's successor Nadir Shah (1929-1933).

aspired to live) in Kabul. This city developed upper and middle classes with Westernized or semi-Westernized lifestyles' (1992: 82). At the same time, the central government remained dependent on subsidies by Western governments, and consequently failed to confront and 'alter traditional patterns of authority and economy in rural areas' (Goodhand 2004: 50) because it could not risk upsetting the balance of power that, in turn, safeguarded its balance of payments. When Amanullah eventually committed himself to mobilising domestic resources and financing state-led accumulation in order to service international loans by introducing taxation of agricultural production, he pitted himself against provincial landowners who forcefully resisted the implementation of his policy (Rubin 2002: 54-55). As a result, the momentum of urban democracy slowed down, and national-*cum*-tribal politics prevailed as the determining political force in Kabul.

National consolidation and urban growth

Before departing on an extended tour of Europe in 1928, Amanullah once again reinforced his pressure on tax collectors, which increased the hardship particularly in the districts surrounding the capital city. This prompted a local social bandit known as Bacha-e Sqaqo to embark on a march towards Kabul. Upon his entering into the city in 1929 he had himself crowned as the new Amir Habibullah. Yet only a few months later he was deposed, and in October a member of the Pushtun *Musahiban* clan, Nadir Shah, seized the throne in Amanullah's absence. Kabul's fate as a city had once again been determined by interests and actions beyond the urban realm. Even more tragically, Nadir Shah had to rely on a mercenary army consisting of several tribes to capture the capital city, and when these realised that he had no financial resources to pay for their services, they unleashed widespread looting and pillaging on Kabul 'leaving [Nadir Shah] at the head of a state with neither army nor treasury' Rubin (2002: 58). This dual 'remote defeat' gave momentum to the lingering conviction among Kabul's urban intelligentsia that a social transformation of Afghanistan was too ambitious an objective and that the only effective way forward would be a 'nation-state enclave, insulated in as much as possible from the traditional society' (Rubin 1988: 1196).

Under Nadir's successor Zahir Shah (1933-1973), urban growth was picking up as a result of the country's first explicitly city-friendly development vision (Newell 1972: 74; Grötzbach 1979: 22-23). A fourth district was added in 1942, and seven additional districts followed roughly every four years up until 1976, including *Wazir Akbar Khan*, the first largely homogenous upper-class neighbourhood (Arez and Dittmann 2005: 41; cf. Najimi 2004: 79). In 1948, all processes of urban management were subsumed under the supervision of Kabul Municipality. During the following decade, the old city experienced large-scale destruction and subsequent bifurcation as a result of the construction of *Jade Maiwand* (the Maiwand boulevard) and four-storey commercial and office buildings lining its sides. Prefabricated apartment blocks, often reserved for state officials and military officers and their families, were also erected in the old city, adding to its rapidly changing and increasingly disfigured image (Najimi 2004).

Urban planning for Kabul had been driven by an assumption of steady but moderate growth due to the city's functions as a capital and national centre of higher education. Its industrial structure, too, contributed to rising population figures, as did its role in redistributing governmental incomes through formal and informal networks. The first master plan was completed in 1962 with a significant participation of Afghan planning experts. It made provisions for a city of 800,000 people to be built over the course of 25 years. A first revision of this initial plan appeared in 1971 in order to do justice to the growth of the city that was much faster than anticipated. This revised plan accommodated a total urban population of

over 1.4 million expected by 1995, but again it had little impact. Its provisions, aimed at increasing residential density through large scale construction of housing units, were criticised for their ignorance of local preferences for more secluded homes that allowed a sharp separation between private and public spaces. This criticism found its expression in no less than 6,000 applications for individual property to the municipality in 1975 alone. In addition, most of the apartment blocks remained unaffordable for lower strata, and in particular migrants from surrounding rural provinces. Finally, the large scale construction envisioned by this revision ignored the limited capacity of both the construction industry and the financial capital available (Grötzbach 1979: 55-56; cf. Viaro 2004: 155).

Due to resource scarcity but also as an effect of the focus required to 'build the nation in Kabul,' the government under Zahir Shah also once again left more remote areas largely to their own control and adopted a more detached practice of 'co-optation of autonomous local authorities through patronage' (Grötzbach 1979: 55-56). A simultaneous change in national and urban polity was then attempted through the 1964 Constitution, which provided an institutional framework for indirect participation through selected representatives in the National Assembly (*Shura-I-Milli*) and foresaw the division of legislative, executive, and judiciary functions of the state. This included the city level, mandating that the mayor of Kabul be elected in a direct and secret ballot for three years. Municipal elections were indeed held in several Afghan cities in 1966, which was considered a first step in creating a local structure below the national government. However, somewhat mimicking the earlier experiments in local democracy, 'decentralisation' was limited to a consultative role of provincial representatives and left legislative and executive functions untouched (Newell 1972: 181).

Kabul as arena

In curious discontinuity to the previous decades, the fault lines and venues of direct confrontation in Afghanistan of the 1970s shifted away from 'the centre versus the periphery' or 'the state against the tribes', and toward a 'double localisation' at the city level, fuelling further the kind of over-determination that has become a feature of capital city politics in Afghanistan. Educated youth groups, which included rural folk who had benefited from increasing mobility during the 1950s and identified themselves with the modernist agenda of Kabul's rulers, assumed a leading role in challenging the technocratic and modern yet culturally still traditional government elites on both ideological and inter-generational grounds (Shahrani 1986: 61). Moreover, rising socio-political tension within the capital city dovetailed with tension at the village level. Villagers were pitted against local government officials deployed by the central government whose corrupt practices added relativism to the harsh rule of local land owners who demanded up to half of the gross crop from their tenants but also offered long-term perspectives through customarily institutionalised dependent relationships (Newell 1972: 31; cf. Kakar 1979: 205). This created a structure of conflict that amplified the opposition against the central government both nationally (across urban-rural fault lines) and in its own 'backyard' (the capital city). In response, religious mobilisation particularly outside urban centres was motivated also by central government's aggressive support for technocratic secularisation, aided by influential alliances with Western powers. Taken together, these dynamics generated sufficient momentum to upset forty years of continuous royal rule, which have often been labelled the 'golden age of peace and prosperity' in Afghanistan. One root cause of this ousting of King Zahir Shah by a military coup in mid-1973 and the subsequent proclamation of an Afghan Republic can thus be located in the uneasy competition of urban and rural power holders and the inability of the

national government to nurture constructive urban politics amid competition over national resources and sovereignty.

These political failures unravelled amid continued urban growth, especially of Afghanistan's capital city. By the late 1970s, the budget of Kabul Municipality had grown larger than the combined budget of all the other Afghan cities (Wiebe 1978: 74). This is yet another exemplification of the persisting allegiance to a centralist polity that backed up the national system of central control with a sub-national concentration of resource allocation in the capital city. Unsurprisingly, this unequal distribution not only among cities but also between cities and the hinterland fed into the hostility towards the 'promises' of urban life felt most strongly among traditional Afghans (Hatch Dupree 2002: 982; Tajbakhsh 2001). The pattern of exclusion and rejection eventually nurtured its own opposition by creating a group of educated minority leaders of a wide political and religious spectrum, 'ambitious men whose access to power was blocked. Through their participation in the state educational system and the time they all spent in the capital, they developed aspirations not only for themselves but for their nation' Rubin (1992: 94). This argument is central indeed as it puts marginalised but educated and 'nationalised' groups in the city itself into the foreground of investigation. As we shall see in the following, agency for structural change was thus not only nurtured by rural insurgency against an alleged urban project of modernity, but also by very concrete actions taken within the city.

As an effect of the thaw in the Cold War during the 1970s, aid flows into the country from both the United States government and the Russian bureaucracy began to first stagnate and then increasingly ebb away (Shahrani 1986: 60). Increasingly vociferous youth movements, stimulated by the declaration of the 1964 National Constitution, which in practice remained an exercise in 'democracy from above' confined to urban centres (Boesen 2004: 5; cf. Grevemeyer 1990; Newell 1972: 78), had entered as 'a new force into the political processes of the country' (Shahrani 1986). They demanded more political control and also specific policies to address widespread unemployment among urban university graduates.

Radical ideas both from the religious right (led by Professor Rabbani and including Gulbuddin Hekmatyar who later emerged as a central figure in *mujahedin* resistance and the post-*mujahedin* struggle over Kabul) and the political left (mainly the leftist *Parcham*, formed by urban Tajiks and Pashtuns, and *Khalq*, which consisted mostly of rural Pushtuns as well as Tajiks and Uzbeks; ICG 2005: 2) were cultivated among students. Indeed, attempts within the progressive urban elite to address the persistent imbalance between poverty in the countryside and the urban periphery, and the wealth of urban traders and rural landowners had already been made under Amanullah. In 1966, the newly appointed Prime Minister Mohammed Hashem Maiwandwal had then delivered a starkly socialist tinted speech in which he urged to eradicate the remains of feudalism through a land reform. This was met with instant public acclaim among the urban intelligentsia but again upset landed elites. Maiwandwal had to resign a year later, and the land reform was only implemented in 1976 under Daoud, shortly before a new political crisis unravelled.

The third invasion

In 1977, the Daoud government was in a gridlock situation, feeling the pressure from the technocratic and bureaucratic elite on one end and from traditionalists and religious power holders with a large constituency in rural areas on the other. However, the latter provided less of an imminent political challenge compared to the increasingly popular urban-based leftist movement led by aspiring young politicians from both affluent urban (for example, Babrak

Karmal) and impoverished rural (for example, Nur Mohammed Taraki) family backgrounds. It also incorporated high ranking officials in the civilian administration and the military forces (Westad 2005: 299-300).

As result of this internal pressure building up in the capital city, Daoud was overthrown in 1978 by the temporarily reunified Khalq and Parcham. They carried forward a radical reform agenda that entailed yet another attempt to implement a land reform which they sought to push through in a decentralised fashion by sending out young members of the student body and the party cadre in order to oversee its implementation at the local level. Not surprisingly, this strategy was met with fierce resistance not only by landlords but also by designated beneficiaries who simply did not believe that the central state would actually intervene on their behalf in case of local retaliation, and who therefore saw the policy as a dangerous encroachment on their tiny livelihoods. The first rural uprisings soon followed and gained momentum due to Islamist infiltration and subsequent indoctrination. The fighting reached Kabul in August 1979 but culminated in February 1980, two months after the invasion of Russian forces on Christmas 1979, in the 'Night of Allahu Akbar'. This was a 'largely spontaneous rejection of the regime and its Soviet sponsors' (Rubin 2002: 135, 186) involving students, shopkeepers, and workers. Here again, we see how recent Afghan history cannot be reduced to a tale of 'rural versus urban'. Societal fault lines ran across the capital city, reinforcing Kabul's function as a gateway but also interface of national competition over political, economic, and socio-cultural rule.

The ensuing Russian occupation necessitated a greater degree of coordination and mobility among resistance groups (Grevemeyer 1990: 112-130), and it was precisely the detachment of national governance from local constituents that proved to be one a major facilitating factors for the maintenance of a successful insurgency movement. The *mujahedin* demonstrated enormous talent and political sensitivity in casting the occupying force as 'infidel foreign invaders' based in Kabul and driven by an agenda of turning the country on its head (Westad 2005: 350; cf. Schetter 2006). Moreover, and contrary to previous revolutionary movements in France, Russia, or China, the *mujahedin* did not have to rely on domestic discontent for support. They were once again able to mobilise massive financial resources from the international system, this time in explicit support of a violent agenda.

According to Glatzer (2005), the fundamental mistake committed by the Kabul-based yet Moscow-steered communists was to unsettle the inequitable yet stable rural balance and the desire of the urban elite to create an effective central state with sufficient political and economic control over the countryside, culminating eventually in 'the Kabul state losing its countryside in the course of the 1980s'⁷ (Glatzer, 2005: 12). This process was exacerbated by the activity of Russian troops outside the capital city. The Russians regarded Kabul and the provinces in the east (towards Pakistan) and the north as its 'strategic Afghanistan' and waged a war against physical infrastructure of strategic value to the insurgency (Roy 1986: 189-190; cf. Cramer and Goodhand 2002: 895). The result was a brutal suppression of unruly villagers and, at times, their forced recruitment to dig trenches and tunnels to bolster the defence of the capital city (Hippler 2005: 26; Goodhand 2004: 51; Arez and Dittmann 2005: 102). At the same time, relatively better living conditions as well as the arrival of internally displaced persons increased the pressure on Kabul's urban infrastructure, exemplified by an estimated doubling of its population to 1.5 million inhabitants within the decade of Russian occupation. This rapid expansion exacerbated urban poverty in the city and thus also contributed to the

⁷ Author's translation.

tipping of the balance between public appreciation versus hostility toward the communist rule.

The fourth and fifth invasions

With increasing resistance against remote rule from Kabul, the city's backwards transition 'from a modern urban centre to a phantom city'⁸ began (Magnaldi and Patera 2004: 69). A politics-laden space slowly came undone. At the end of this gruesome process was the 'temporary eclipse of the centre', as Glatzer (2005: 11) has put it. During the height of the fierce battles, first between the *mujahedin* insurgency and the Russian occupants and later between *mujahedin* factions, Kabul remained one of the three constituting pillars of the Islamabad-Kabul-Peshawar triangle from where some international aid organisations were operating (Magnaldi and Patera 2004: 81). Operations continued even though the regularly changing fault lines of conflict within the capital city made the delivery of humanitarian assistance extremely challenging (Atmar and Goodhand 2001: 51; Marsden 1998). Subsequent military offensives in March and August 1995 by a coalition of commanders against the well-organised troops commanded by Massoud, a leading Panj'sheri *mujahed* who controlled the north of the city, proved futile. The capture of Kabul by the Taleban a year later was more the result of political dynamics and instability between warring *mujahedin* factions and less one of a coherent military or convincing political strategy by the intruders (Arez and Dittmann 2005: 115). Following an accord in May 1996, Massoud had to accept the appointment and entrance of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who had been shelling Kabul from 1992 to 1995, into the capital city as Prime Minister (Rubin 2002: 272-273; Ward 1996). When the Taleban forces subsequently captured Hekmatyar's military base south of Kabul in August, Massoud was pressured to provide troop assistance from his urban strongholds, which weakened his defence lines in the capital city and tipped the balance in favour of the advancing Taleban forces who captured Kabul on 26 September 1996 against little resistance from Massoud's withdrawing units (Davis 2001: 56-68; Cooley 2006: 143-145).

Why were the Taleban so keen on conquering Kabul, given that their ideology was very much rooted in and geared toward the traditionalism of rural areas? By then, the city mainly had symbolic power; most of its infrastructure and housing stock was destroyed. Roy (2001: 21) has offered a convincing dual interpretation. On the one hand, Kabul was a 'Babylon' ready for purification, to be pushed 'back to the roots' in order to finally fit into an ethos of Afghan tribalism. On the other hand, a desire to 'anthromorphise' Kabul as a political space and to somehow 'punish' it by way of causing suffering to those inhabiting it links back directly to the experience of Soviet occupation and the latter's toleration by city based elites. Here we see precisely the tragedy of Kabul's overdetermination. Indeed, rather than focusing on rehabilitating the city 'as a city', no urban reconstruction of any significance was undertaken during Taleban rule, not only due to initial resource scarcity but crucially also because of their explicitly anti-urban ideology (Arez and Dittmann 2005: 148).

The sixth invasion: Kabul after 2001

Competition over urban planning authority

The force of Kabul's most recent invasion took a similar shape to the fifth incursion a decade earlier. This time, however, it was again a foreign superpower that waged war on the city.

⁸ Author's translation.

Already dishevelled neighbourhoods were targeted once again, this time in the name of fighting terrorism.

The immediate post-war work focus of Kabul Municipality was set on the renovation of office buildings and representative structures, predominantly with the financial support of international agencies, rudimentary traffic management through the construction of several roundabouts, and lobbying for large-scale housing construction schemes. Urban infrastructure renovation, including the rehabilitation of urban roads, was usually done in conjunction with INGOs, with the Municipality taking what it considered a 'supervisory role' (Soave 2004). In 2002, it reportedly had three thousand, one hundred and five workers on its payroll, compared to a total of seven hundred and ninety two central government employees charged with supervising and executing urban construction work across the country, with three hundred and six of them working outside the capital city (CSO 2003).

Rather encouragingly, the Municipality displayed a basic understanding of its role in the process of urban economic development by trying to maintain the flow of traffic and clearing up areas of illegal or hazardous trading activity along the Kabul River and main intersections, albeit in autocratic and sometimes arbitrary moves. Two participants in a focus group recalled,

'[2:] The television showed a demonstration in front of the municipality. There were a lot of shopkeepers whose shops had been demolished by decree of the municipality in order to make way for road development. [1:] They demanded a solution from the mayor.'

Another commentator added, 'When the mayor took out these wholesalers away, there was a lot of resistance from commanders, from people with money: they were offering him a lot of money, but he did not accept it'.

Nonetheless, 'weak urban management' was regularly brought forward as one of the major post-conflict challenges, an area that had received relatively less direct support by international agencies. As outlined above, most regenerative efforts in the urban realm in Afghanistan had been either in physical reconstruction or indirect, through the concentration of relief agencies, their administrations and the resulting demand for skilled and unskilled labour in cities (Djallalzada 2004: 21). A local observer wrote in 2002, 'The third floor of the Kabul municipality office is a scene of absolute chaos. There is hardly any room to move or breathe as hundreds of desperate Afghans cram the corridors, all shuffling and jostling in their efforts to reach the property office and discover if – at long last – they have been allocated a precious piece of land' (Saeed 2002). Three years later, one of the interviewees for this study still submitted that,

'The management in nearly all departments and municipalities is really a disaster. They do not know what each other are doing so they are really not informed. In addition from the ministries, which are involved in urban issues, there is no coordination. [...] You cannot blame them because they have to run so rapidly and change what they have learned 25 years ago. But there should be the possibility to overrule them'.

Residents in Kabul also stated that they were expected to pay a premium for procedures such as registration for housing and neighbourhood upgrading, being received by an official, or obtaining public services. Public officials thus seek to support their admittedly meagre income (between US\$35 and US\$200 per month). However, this type of corruption is

particularly worrisome, for three reasons. First, it undermines further the already weak confidence of residents in the system of urban management. Second, it reduces the prospects for establishing sound taxation systems, thus significantly depleting the municipal resource base. Last, and most significantly, it reduces the asset base of already vulnerable people (Beall and Esser 2005: 31-32; Schütte 2004).

UN Habitat initiated a task force on urban development in mid-2003, comprising the Ministry of Finance as lead negotiator and high-level representatives from Kabul Municipality and the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing [MUDH]. Yet regular meetings of so-called 'urban focal points' produced little more than incidental crisis management and failed to render an analysis of the politico-economic situation and thus derive strategies for cooperation and implementation. It has even been suggested that external finances made available by the donor community constitute 'an overpowering and dominating force in shaping urban development – with the main, decisive element very often being nothing other than the need to speed up the 'flow of funds'' (Knapp 2004: 101).

Interviews held as part of this research confirmed this allegation. One senior official of a bilateral agency boasted: 'We decide what messages are to get out, to whom, when and why and it is all coordinated with the media [but] the central government does not have a well-functioning political machine'. This tension between donors and indigenous implementing organisations was wide-reaching, with the latter caught up between excessive 'inclusion' in the form of consecutive meetings and the constant pressure to produce reports, and exclusion as a result of enduring distrust on the part of international donors as to the loyalty and capacity of national and especially local actors (Brynen 2005: 242, cf. Stewart 2006).

At the end of 2003, Kabul Municipality underwent what Arez and Dittmann (2005: 151) call a 'paradigm shift' with the reappointment of former Mayor Ghulam Sakhi Noorzad who, during his previous leadership in the late 1970s, had acquired a good reputation: he was considered to not engage in corrupt practices and to possess technical understanding. His quest was to resume work on his 'long-deferred dream' (Cloud 2005). This was the implementation of the Soviet-designed master plan from 1978, when Kabul had approximately 780,000 inhabitants – This was, as one respondent argued, a 'means of policy reduction'.

Noorzad's vision was one of wide main streets, shiny ministries based on Russian drafts, and orderly neighbourhoods. 'The level of government-encouraged private sector development is insufficient', an international agency staff member argued. 'The municipality wants to re-acquire all the land and then develop it. This is completely unrealistic and would also be utterly unaffordable'. Another interviewee illuminated the functionalist role of urban development saying, 'The only sense of accountability from the Mayor of Kabul is that he wants to do things and be seen to be doing things before the elections. He is a [President] Karzai appointee and is under a lot of pressure to do things, as is USAID to support him. [...] This is one of the reasons we have a municipal assistance programme'.

The Mayor acknowledged the lack of housing as one of the foremost challenges of urban management in the capital city. He was alarmed by the ongoing influx of rural residents, temporary in the context of labour migration but also permanent, and the (by then already outdated) survey conducted by the Municipality in 1999, which found 58,614 housing units – almost half of the city's housing stock – to be in 'informal areas'. However, he considered forced resettlement of more than 3 million residents to be a somehow more feasible policy

option than amending the planning framework laid out by a 28-year old map. Trying to explain this position, one senior municipal bureaucrat argued that Kabul was simply built 'only for one million people. The recent growth of the urban population is unnatural!'

Hence the municipality insisted on implementing the outdated master plan and concentrated its own development efforts in planned areas. One of his senior staff explained, 'We cannot and must not change or destroy the current master plan, but rather use it as our framework'. Municipal staff thus displayed a clear lack of political will to address service provision in informal settlements (Schütte 2005: 25) and did 'not see with a keen eye intervention in these neighbourhoods as it conflicts with greater development plans and increases the risk of newcomers settling in' (ACF 2004: 13). Interference of national players in local matters was widespread: '[2:] The Mayor once told us not to work in district ten, because it does not belong to a planned area. He took his master plan and said, 'If you work here, I will take action against you.' But Younos Qanouni [former Minister of Interior and Education], wanted us to work there, so eventually we started working nonetheless. Qanouni is now one of the major opposition leaders'.

At the same time, national authorities were frustrated by the Municipality's inactivity, illustrated by the following comment by a ministerial department head: 'We tell all the families to put their garbage into the bins, but then there are no bins. My department is not responsible for putting bins everywhere. The Municipality should do that, but they have different priorities [...] The Ministry of Interior helps us pushing environmental infringements, but there are no significant interfaces with anyone in the Municipality'. Outright misunderstandings were also ripe. A senior municipal planner complained,

'I am sceptical of this 'empowerment' idea. [UN] Habitat claims to empower the Municipality. But we cannot destroy the illegal houses in this area because we now need the approval of three different ministries, which we don't get. We have requested police and military to protect the destruction process, but we don't get any. So the Municipality cannot proceed as it has to, according to the Master Plan. This is not empowerment if Habitat does not give the Municipality the autonomy to act!'

In 2004, Kabul Municipality lost its authority to approve plans to the MUDH, which has caused a great deal of frustration among municipal bureaucrats. One respondent argued, 'Look, the Mayor has the same position as a minister, and Kabul is the national capital. The power the city has needs to be balanced with good services. [...] MUDH should really focus on provincial centres and decrease its involvement in Kabul affairs'. Another one complained, 'The MUDH makes the plans, the Municipality executes. In the current situation, this division of work is not acceptable. We need planning authority in the municipality as well. [...] It's strange: cities like Jalalabad, Herat and Kandahar want more input and guidance from MUDH but don't get any. We want to get less and obtain more freedom instead, but they keep telling us what to do'. Municipal staff claimed that they themselves should be in charge of the city and demand a massive increase in funding in order to develop neighbourhood by neighbourhood, guided by the old master plan or, as they argued, a new plan still to be drawn.

In the same year, a National Urban Programme (NUP) driven by international development agencies began to take shape (NUP; cf. TISA 2004a, 2004b). The NUP attempted to provide a framework for informing ongoing urban activities at the community level. With six sub-

programmes focused on a wide range of topics, the NUP is ambitious in scope and not without problems. Yet the process of policy deliberation was far less participatory than the provisions made by the policy itself, as a senior non-governmental planner explained.

‘Let’s face it: they never had to sell the NUP to the people. [...] There is always going to be this kind of sealing for the time being where people’s feelings are being locked out. [...] It is a very imposing process, pushing it down on people. If the donors are dumping huge amounts of money, then what is the government going to do, and what is in for the people? [...] The whole NUP consultative process was very patronising. ‘How we going to approach land...?’ This idea that you can draw a policy in two weeks is completely out of context. This whole workshop process: completely inattentive and culturally insensitive [...]. And then, where was the lead after the workshops? The Ministry of Finance? I told the minister, ‘there is nothing that is not in the NUP!’ [...] Some parts are really contradictory: they are talking about an enabling environment, and then they talk about provision of housing...’

What is more, the pressure exerted on the programme by the President’s office and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was massive. One interviewee explained, ‘It is very difficult for donors to push capacity building. It is very frustrating to do development in a highly political environment’. Another one was more explicit:

‘The president says ‘the only thing that matters is getting projects going on the ground’ and this is because the peace and the political project depends on this. So this is behind the NPPs [National Priority Programmes]. We were advised by planners from ISAF who told us about ‘means and ends’ [...] They said ‘we are not interested in how you get there, the means and mechanics, just where you end up.’ [...] There is no end state in the urban sector, it is all process and the end state constantly changes. In some of the other national priority programmes people had similar doubts though but the young ones did not feel confident to challenge them. [...] We set up a planning team to define the five projects and what to do over the ten years as instructed by the military. We came up with the six sub-programmes of the NUP. We had to expect that they would go ahead with or without us anyway and there was a big time concern as they were going so quickly’.

‘It is an evolving process for the municipality and ministry as well and it is ‘make it up as you go along’ and hope you can deal with the future unanticipated needs later,’ another international advisor explained. ‘In some cases it is easier to do development here than elsewhere because there are no rules, but they can come back to shoot us. We can get Karzai to issue decrees about this land or that project and those beneficiaries, but it is not a guideline or a rule book in the end’.

Considering such positions, it is perplexing to register the admission of various donors at the June 2008 Afghanistan Conference in Paris, France that international agendas for post-war Afghanistan could have been ‘too ambitious’ (Gebauer 2008). In light of the insights discussed above, it is hardly comprehensible that this has apparently come as such a surprise to the international community. Moreover, planning has not been the only feature of failed international reconstruction strategies for the country. Another allegedly crucial component is the struggle to somehow ‘revive’ Afghan nationhood as a glue and foundation for a liberal

democracy. This second component is equally telling in its negligence of the very real contradictions that it creates as regards the necessary yet largely neglected strengthening of state structures. Here again, scrutinising the role of Kabul as the capital city offers a sharp lens on the challenges of post-war reconstruction.

Imagining a nation or governing a country

Afghanistan's contemporary nation-building exercise finds a historical precedent in the post-Amanullah reign of the Mohammadzai clan during which the first Constitution was written, national holidays were introduced, and contacts between rural areas and foreign areas were encouraged (Hatch Dupree 2002: 981). The renewed adoption of a nationalist discourse in Afghanistan by parts of the population is linked to the individual experience of displacement by approximately every second Afghan during the Russian occupation, the following civil war, and the international military campaign against the Taleban. This was instrumental in creating a popular spatial-national consciousness with both internally displaced Afghans and international refugees both coming to perceive nationhood as the new smallest common denominator (Schetter 2005: 60, cf. Saeed and Nasrat 2005).

At the same time however, expectations generated by the concept of nationhood in Afghanistan varied greatly between people of different educational levels, a phenomenon that coincides with spatial location. Whereas the idea of 'nation' receives emotive acclaim from many younger and educated city dwellers, for rural, usually uneducated residents it mainly demonstrates the weakness of the degree to which they are embedded in state bureaucracy (Johnson and Leslie 2004: 137). Indeed, 'since many 'new ideas' emerged from Kabul and tried to make inroads into provincial and rural areas, anything coming from beyond the known confines of the community is treated with suspicion' (ACSF 2004: 29).

Additional resistance against the nation project, conceived by international agencies and a Kabul-based intelligentsia, and aided by pan-Islamic forces under Pakistani leadership, came from the south, east and south-east of the country inhabited by Pushtun tribes. The incremental emergence of a feeling of state-bound togetherness envisioned by authors such as Mouffe (1993: 84-85, 1992: 235-26) was an alternative to forging citizenship through the ballot box but is likely out of reach for the time being. This is so despite the need to 'be present' in Kabul, for both political and economic reasons. As one respondent put it, '[2] Kabul is considered a win-or-lose place – either a peaceful political battlefield, or a violent political battlefield. [...] Think of our civil war, when Kabul was divided into zones...' Another interviewee supported this view and illustrated it as follows:

'I think that we are still in the process of centralisation. You have to centralise before you decentralise. The problem is, once you centralise, will you really decentralise, because the people in Kabul will have all the power. So far, they don't, because they are still people controlling the provinces. [...] The problem is that this decentralisation process is creating a lot of tension. If, as a rural community, you cannot partake in the system in Kabul, then you are seen as a complete loser'.

More than three years after the sixth invasion, there was still 'really nothing that can be decided in the provinces'. One academic observer pointed out that 'The supply of posts and positions is concentrated here in Kabul; everyone who wants to participate in this fight has to

come to Kabul, physically'.⁹ Indeed, in line with traditional patterns of holding court, it is still common for rural Afghans to travel long distances to Kabul with the expectation of being able to meet a minister or even the President to complain about local circumstances and, regularly, demand the replacement of specific senior bureaucrats (Giustozzi 2004: 2).

Leading Afghan intellectuals argue that it is precisely the connection between the provinces and the centre that needs to be strengthened. However, this would capacitate policymaking in Kabul, and not empower the periphery. Thus, 'the space of governance has to be reinvented in Afghanistan, and at the heart of this is reporting. Every province, every district, has to report to the centre on a regular basis. [...] We have to develop matrices of governance where a mechanism of binding the provinces to the centre takes place'.¹⁰

At the same time, the theme of Kabul as the locus of friction between modernist and traditionalist forces had lost nothing of its significance (Poya 2005; Sands 2006). For instance, Kabul's radio stations are controlled meticulously by city-based religious authorities, including the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Radio *Qarabagh* once cited letters from listeners complaining about the city's mayor using a teachers' day ceremony to make political statements praising the *mujahedin*. The mayor was quick to deny the allegation and asked a local *shura* [religious council comprising of *mullahs* and elders] to intervene. The *shura*, however, eventually ruled in favour of the radio station (Kumar 2006: 266; cf. Mojumdar 2005). In light of these frictions, an image that characterises the competition over public values as a fight between 'the urban' and 'the rural' would be a starkly simplified representation of social reality in Afghanistan. Quite the contrary, these standoffs were taking place within the capital city.

In such a diverse environment, apolitical and secular notions of a 'city-based Afghan civil society' that would effectively balance and check the power of the state and its enemies at various levels are evidently unrealistic. Such hopes ignore the social prestige that religious scholars continue to enjoy among both rural and urban populations, and while urban residents in particular are often dissatisfied with the remaining social hierarchy, advice by religious *shuras* is not easily ignored (Johnson and Leslie 2004: 40). Furthermore, it is not unusual that *shuras* become vocal against government decisions or even individual officials. The three circles of power – clans, government, and religion – do not eclipse one another; there is a degree of overlap but also redefinition and repositioning. An assumption that religious structures and their priorities are somehow identical with state structures, both united against the citizenry, would therefore be misguided both conceptually and empirically. In fact, assistance by international actors to city-based secular organisations have regularly turned out as indirect business development, supporting 'suitcase NGOs' and refusing to acknowledge the opportunities that lie in a little-understood religion-based civil society.

In sum, a depoliticised approach to civic revitalisation in Afghanistan such as that done through the equation of farmer organisations, which are motivated economically, as civil society (Rondinelli and Montgomery 2004: 233) appears ahistorical. The concept's transferability is rendered limited in a social environment of networks that are oriented around extended family ties and ethnicity rather than clustering dynamically around specifically defined public interests. What is more, if the social capabilities embedded in tribal and traditional structures were to be excluded *ex ante* (Schmeidl 2004), then efforts to 'build a civil society' in Afghanistan are even doubly misguided.

⁹ Antonio Giustozzi, presentation at the American Institute of Afghanistan Studies, Kabul, 4 May 2005.

¹⁰ Ashraf Ghani, presentation at Chatham House, London, 26 September 2005.

Conclusion

The study of Kabul has revealed that processes of urban *cum* national ‘recovery’ in post-intervention Afghanistan constitute telling examples of how international assistance can backfire. The research reveals that even though Afghanistan was not officially ‘at war’ at the time of writing,¹¹ it continued experiencing tugs of war between entrenched interests and institutional multiplicity at several levels of polity, which are weaving the urban level into a multi-layered structure.

The study thus finds that the axis connecting national and international agencies is the most powerful one; it has the greatest leverage with respect to the formulation of policies geared toward alterations of existing institutions within the urban realm. Extending a theoretical notion that has been fielded by Tajbakhsh (2001), I propose the concept of ‘over-determination’ to describe the structural foundation on which these processes of partly remote-controlled urban governance can evolve. Crucially, international intervention and resulting projects of nation state-creation and ‘local empowerment’ have produced ambivalent outcomes at best, and have done so at the expense of ‘policy space’ for the city (cf. Cavill and Sohail 2004: 170).

Moreover, the study shows that at least three assumptions commonly made about reconstructing post-war cities in fragile states may require substantial revision. First, the dividing line between vulnerable and protected, poor and rich, and voiceless and powerful cannot be drawn neatly between urban and rural spaces as it equally runs within cities. Second, an apolitical and market-driven vision of and resulting strategies to recovery in a weak institutional environment are not the best, but in fact the worst approaches to post-intervention and post-war urban planning as they carry the potential to strengthen exclusive structures and patterns of the urban political economy while simultaneously empowering anti-government forces. Third, imposing urban development strategies without accommodating local politics and committing to the necessary patience for local institutional adjustment will not only be ineffective; it may also increase human insecurity, thus rendering such cities even more difficult to plan and govern.

Finally, if any significant bifurcation point for the structure of politics in and on Kabul can be derived from the present study, it seems to be the Russian invasion, almost thirty years ago. Seen from a comparative perspective, this finding does also not bode well for the ongoing occupation of Iraq, the other international battlefield where promises of democracy and prosperity have turned out to be much longer shots than projected at the outset of invasion. If such noble objectives should not completely drop from sight, then cities as motors of economic as well as political recovery in post-war settings deserve more nuanced attention.

¹¹ On September 15, 2006 amid mounting casualties among NATO forces fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan’s south, the US news channel CNN changed its theme for reports from the country to “The Unfinished War”.

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