

The rise of the Hazaras and the challenge of pluralism in Afghanistan 1978-2011

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1. Introduction

The response of Afghanistan's Hazaras to the opportunities arising in the post 2001 dispensation is most simply characterized as eager. Members of this eager minority have maximized their participation in the new political, economic and social fields, in particular education. As a result of the Hazaras' eager participation in the post-2001 Kabul-based order, their community has made more rapid progress than any other. International media coverage of the process has used positive headlines such as "Afghanistan's liberated Hazaras", "Coming up from the bottom" and "Hazaras head of the class". Ostensibly this transformation of the status of minority is a triumph of pluralism in a multi-ethnic Muslim polity, worthy of study to identify the reasons for the success. But Hazara progress has been accompanied by significant ethnic polarization of national politics. Meanwhile there are questions over the extent to which Hazara gains are grounded on the development of institutions or conventions, or on political expediency. On such issues rests the question of whether Hazara progress is a transitory phenomenon associated with a time-limited foreign intervention or whether it is sustainable. This article considers the nature of changes in the Hazaras' post-2001 socio-political role, the drivers of this change and the long-term prospects for this aspect of Afghan pluralism.

2. Background to ethnic politics in Afghanistan

Of all Afghanistan-related topics, ethnicity is the one where the scholar most risks offending deep sensibilities. The issues of which categories to use for Afghan social groups, the percentages to ascribe to them and even whether ethnicity matters at all are much disputed. Afghanistan is a classic example of a state built upon a diverse society, in which group identities have been reshaped over time¹. The 2004 Afghan constitution recognizes fourteen ethnic groups, of which the first four mentioned, Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek are the largest. In reality Afghans' identities are complex, multi-layered, over-lapping and dynamic. The Hazaras are typically described as being Farsi-speakers belonging to the Shia sect who mainly inhabit the mountainous center of Afghanistan (Hazarajat) and subscribe to an origin myth of descent from the armies of Genghez Khan². As a practical example of the malleable boundaries of quasi-

¹ (Shahrani, 2002) on the interplay between ethnic identity, external politics and state action

² (Mousavi, 1998)

ethnic categories, political leaders mobilizing Hazaras over the past three decades have grappled with the issue of whether to include the Syeds of Hazarajat who claim Arab descent, or the Sunni communities who claim tribal affinity to the Hazaras, or the non-Hazara Shias such as the Qazilbash. Nevertheless, despite some of the ambiguities inherent in operationalizing a Hazara identity, leaders have successfully mobilized Hazaras in each stage of the Afghan conflict since 1978. The institutional vehicles which conducted the early mobilization of the Hazaras were already in decline by 2001 and further atrophied during the years of the Bonn Process³. However the eager Hazara response to the post-2001 opportunities for socio-political advancement ensured that Hazaras further increased their national share of political representation even after the demise of the parties which had initially mobilized them.

Because narratives of ethnicity are highly contested, in much Afghan public discourse the prevailing conventions demand that commentators ignore or deny ethnicity as a factor in public life⁴. The idea of national unity (*wahadat e milli*) is venerated in public discourse. Embodied in the notion of national unity is the suggestion that Pashtuns, Hazaras, Tajiks and Uzbeks and the others are all fundamentally Afghans. By implication their ethnic identity cannot predict their political behavior, economic prospects or even propensity to support or oppose the insurgency. One of the barriers to empirical investigation of ethnicity is that any scholarship presenting evidence of ethnic identity correlating with political behavior or involvement in conflict risks being accused of subverting national unity. And yet despite the convention of denial of ethnicity as a factor, the author's observations of the practical politics of the Hazaras over more than two decades suggest that ethnicity matters.

The key facts in Afghan ethnic politics are that Pashtuns are the largest group but do not command a simple majority. Estimates for ethnic shares in the population vary. For example Rubin cites the position in 1978 as Pashtuns 46%, Tajiks and close kin 32%, Hazaras 10%, Uzbeks 8%⁵. However, most recent estimates show less of a gap between the Pashtuns and the other major ethnicities. The arithmetic dictates that ethnic players face a richer choice of alliances than in a binary majority – minority position. This has applied equally during the factional conflict of the 1990's, a time of shifting alliances and during the negotiations between presidential candidates and allies in the 2004 and 2009 elections.

The major ethnic groups have reputations which reflect their elites' relative positions in the ancien regime power hierarchy but which make little allowance for the reality of diversity

³ (Ibrahimi, 2009) for the demise of the Hazara parties up to 2009.

⁴ (Simonsen, 2004) for an account which argues that the salience of ethnicity in Afghan politics has increased but which accurately records the Afghan sensibilities. (Rippenburg, 2005) makes the distinction that the masses have not been ethnicized, but the conflict has.

⁵ (Rubin, 1996)

within each of the groups⁶. Pashtuns have a reputation as the dominant group, with a privileged position in state institutions since the origins of the state. However significant differences among Afghanistan's Pashtuns including those between the major tribal groupings Ghilzai and Durrani and between those in Pashtun-majority homelands of the south versus the "naqileen" Pashtuns settled among the other ethnicities north of the Hindukush. Although Pashtuns include much of Afghanistan's cosmopolitan internationally-mobile elite, the group also includes a rural base deeply impervious to modernity, suspicious of education and resistant to modern institutions.

Tajiks have a reputation as the alternative dominant group, historically the partners of the Pashtuns in administering the country. Much of the sophisticated urban-dwelling population, well-placed in the bureaucracy and professions is Tajik. Tajik leverage over national politics was increased by the decision of Afghanistan's second ruler to relocate the capital from Kandahar to Kabul, an area with a large Tajik population settled nearby. Tajiks were responsible for the two short episodes since 1747 when non-Pashtun leaders ran the country – Habibullah II alias Bacha Saqao in 1928/29 and Burhanuddin Rabbani in 1992/96. The Uzbeks share with the Hazaras the sense of having been excluded from political power in the Afghan state. But their home areas north of the Hindukush offer far richer agriculture and livestock keeping. Both Uzbeks and Tajiks differ from the Hazaras in another important respect, that they share the Sunni sect with the Pashtuns, while the Hazaras are in part defined by their Shia sect.

The Hazaras have a reputation as the most marginalized of the major ethnic groups. The latest version of this narrative can be summed up : "For much of this country's history, the Hazara were typically servants, cleaners, porters and little else, a largely Shiite minority sidelined for generations, and in some instances [massacred](#), by Pashtun rulers"⁷. The Hazaras' narrative of their under-development vilifies the role of modern Afghanistan's founder, Amir Abdur Rahman during the 1880's in incorporating Hazarajat into the state system with extreme violence. Hazara political figures and intellectuals regularly interpret contemporary developments in the light of the Abdur Rahman experience. As documentary evidence of the connection to historic events some of Hazara elders still cherish the land deeds from the territory expropriated in the nineteenth century and claim to be seeking recompense⁸.

The Hazara historical narrative of oppression focuses on the group's rural hinterland, and recollections of collusion between centrally appointed Pashtun administrators and Pashtun pastoralists brought into the area, a situation which they describe in terms of internal colonialism⁹. However the economy of the Hazaras has long depended upon rural-urban

⁶ (Elphinstone, 1815) is the classic record of these reputations

⁷ (Oppel, 2010) – opening line.

⁸ (Singh, 2001; Shahrani, 2002) examples of academic presentations of this narrative of historical marginalization

⁹ (Shahrani, 2002) for an account of Afghan internal colonialism.

migration and the establishment of Hazara communities in Kabul, Quetta and other cities. In urban Afghanistan Hazaras are stereotyped as poor unskilled laborers – the pushers of carts or providers of domestic labor. The narrative describes how Hazaras were long barred from high status occupations such as the army officer corps¹⁰, national government and positions of authority.

The collapse of the ancien regime in 1978 created conditions in which Afghanistan's ethno-linguistic groups, could mobilize and challenge the old distribution of power structure. This mobilization was most pronounced and explicit among the Hazaras, who maneuvered to advance their status in both government-controlled areas and in the armed opposition. A rising sense of Hazara identity and political consciousness was evident during the civil war period in the political rhetoric of leaders such as Abdul Ali Mazari and Mohammad Mohaqiq. After 2001 Hazara rhetoric was expressed in terms not of separatism, but of demands for a stronger role in national politics and a better deal as citizens of the new Afghanistan. The Hazara political leadership endorsed the Bonn Process as a way of pushing the Afghan state to fulfill the aspirations that driven their mobilization during the preceding conflict. This was the ideological basis of the Hazara eagerness after 2001.¹¹

3. An account of Hazara progress 2001-2011

In multiple aspects of public life Hazaras have increased their participation or status relative to pre-2001 levels. The tangible rise of the Hazaras has become one of the principal socio-political features of the decade after the Taliban, prompting accolades such as "Afghanistan's success story: The liberated Hazara minority"¹².

Public space

The most visible way in which Hazaras have gained public space is in their observance of the mourning ceremonies of the month of Moharram. At best, under the Taliban these occurred behind closed doors. During the decade after 2001 they transformed into highly public commemorations, with street parades and then the attendance of dignitaries and masses in Shia prayer halls¹³. The Hazaras' ability to bring their rituals into the public space, with official blessing, vividly symbolize the assertiveness of a community rapidly overcoming its historical marginalization.

¹⁰ (Riphenburg, 2005) for an account of the evolution of inclusiveness in the army and the idea that the pre-1992 army was the main integrating institution in the multi-ethnic society.

¹¹ (Canfield, 2004) Cites Hizb Wahadat, the largest Hazara politico-military faction quoting Abdul Ali Mazari to rationalize pursuit of equal citizenship through the Bonn process.

¹² (Sappenfield, 2007)

¹³ (Clark, 2011)

National level patronage politics

The main Hazara politico-military faction, Hizb Wahadat participated in the armed resistance against the Taliban, informally known as the Northern Alliance, and on this basis participated in the Bonn Agreement, upon which the post-2001 system of government has been based. The cabinet formed in 2001 was designed to give the Northern Alliance factions a stake in the national government, as a result of which Shia leader Ustad Mohaqiq became Planning Minister and deputy chair of the Interim Authority. The process evolved through subsequent rounds of cabinet-making. As factional identification became more ambiguous after 2001, ethnicity became more important, with the cabinets constructed on the basis of (undeclared) ethnic shares. Each cabinet has included a slate of Hazara ministers. Although the President has had the discretion to nominate cabinet members, the political practice which evolved was that he sought nominations from the two main Hazara power-brokers, Ustad Khalili and Ustad Mohaqiq. The ministries allocated to the Hazaras tend to be “nation-building” ministries rather than “power” ministries i.e. Hazaras have held the portfolio for Higher Education, Transport, Planning and Public Works but not for Interior or Defense. Most Hazara nominees to these nation-building ministries can easily be identified as clients of either of the two power-brokers. From participation in the original Bonn deal has flowed inclusion in a national system of patronage politics, whereby those occupying the minister’s seat are able to reward their associates with employment and contracts, as long as they can stay one step ahead of anti-corruption measures. In addition to the Hazara share of ministerial portfolios, they have since 2005 been allocated one of the two vice-presidential slots. The electoral procedure demands that a presidential candidate nominate two vice-presidents. In both elections he has fought, Karzai has nominated a Tajik as First Vice President and a Hazara, Ustad Karim Khalili, as Second Vice President, thus preserving the essential political logic of the Bonn deal and signifying the inclusion of the country’s top three ethnic groups. These power-brokerage formulae have signified that the Hazaras are included in the political system.

Electoral and parliamentary politics

The high level of participation of Hazaras as voters and their tendency to ethnic solidarity has underpinned the Hazara representatives’ share in power politics. In 2004 the leading Hazara candidate, Ustad Mohaqiq, gained 11.7% of the vote. Although Hazaras were predominantly supportive of the Bonn process and sympathetic to Hamid Karzai’s national leadership, the election in large part became an ethnic show of strength. Essentially the leading Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek candidates all drew a majority of votes from their own community. Hamid Karzai, with 55.4% secured his election by being the only major candidate to attract cross-ethnic voting in addition to his own community¹⁴. Shia political representation in the new dispensation was further consolidated in the 2005 parliament. Shias, of whom two-thirds were

¹⁴ [Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan](#)

Hazara, won 18% of seats¹⁵. Hazara mobilization resulted in Ustad Mohaqiq receiving the largest personal vote tally in the country. As an example of how observers related contemporary Hazara electoral politics to the historical narrative, the 2009 presidential election generated the headlines “Afghan minority savors its pivotal role in runoff – the Hazaras, after centuries of discrimination and religious persecution, may be decisive in determining the next president”¹⁶. Although Hamid Karzai had a senior Hazara leader on his ticket, a maverick Hazara candidate also received 10% of votes in the first round and appeared to hold the balance of power. In the event the challenger withdrew and the second round was cancelled. In the 2010 elections the Hazaras and other Shias achieved an over-representation in parliament, increasing their share of seats to 23%, while Pashtuns fell from 47% in the first parliament to 39%¹⁷ in the second. In Ghazni Province, which has a mixed Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara population, turnout in Hazara areas was far higher than in the other areas, which were affected by the insurgency. As a result Hazaras took all the seats in Ghazni, an anomaly which made the president reluctant to accept the results, precipitating a long dispute over the election. It is none too clear what has been the significance of Hazara participation in the parliament, as the President has been successful in excluding it from serious decision making. However, at the least, the strong Hazara voter turnout has ensured that all serious presidential contenders must woo the community and include a Hazara on their list.

Administration

The Hazara narrative of historical marginalization tells how the sub-national administration was designed to disempower them. On the one hand provinces were gerrymandered, with Hazara majority districts attached to adjoining Pashtun majority provinces. On the other hand Hazaras were excluded from senior administration positions. There has been some movement on both of these aspects of the ethnic politics of area administration. In the first place the new government sanctioned the creation of a Hazara majority province in Daikondi, thus undoing one of the cases of gerrymandering. The new province was one of the spoils of the resistance elevation to power. The creation of post-2001 provinces underlined the ascendant powers in the new order – with one for the Tajiks of Panjshir and one for the Hazaras. Appointment of provincial governors has remained one of the main instruments of presidentially dispensed patronage. The selection of the thirty-four provincial governors reflects the centre’s ethnic politics and three simple rules. Firstly, the two Hazara-majority provinces, Bamyan and Daikondi, are reserved for Hazara governors. This has directly tackled one element of the grievance narrative – the Hazara complaint that they have been governed by prejudiced Pashtun outsiders. Secondly, Hazaras are entitled to serve as governors in the mixed population provinces of the north (e.g. Saripol) and west (Herat) and have held the deputy governor slot in

¹⁵ (Wilder, 2005)

¹⁶ (Trofimov, 2009)

¹⁷ Analysis provided to the author by Afghanistan Media Group

Ghazni. However, one glass ceiling remains, which is that no Hazara has been considered as governor in the Pashtun or Tajik majority provinces of the South and North East, including those such as Wardak or Parwan which have a substantial Hazara minority. The ten years of administrative practice amounts to undeclared ethnic reservation, with Hazaras enjoying a significantly increased stake relative to pre-2001 practice.

Security forces

The Hazara participation in the anti-Taliban armed resistance ensured that the Hazara leadership was part of the elite deals around which the police and army were initially constructed. Although their Tajik allies initially headed all the security institutions, Hazara resistance commanders were included in the initial roster of units supported by the Ministry of Defence or drafted into the Ministry of Interior. Karim Khalili's military lieutenant was appointed Deputy in the Ministry of Defense, to safeguard Hazara interests in the ministry. Although Tajiks were more numerous, Hazara officers have occupied some of the senior-most positions in both the army and police. In succession, Hazara officers have served as Corps Commander Kandahar and Mazar I Sherif and Deputy Corps Commander Gardez. In the police, Hazara officers have held the key positions of provincial police chief in Kabul and Helmand and deputy zonal chief in the South West, positions which historically have always been held by Pashtun or Tajik officers. Within their own community Hazaras have faced no social barriers to participation in the government's security forces. In contrast, especially as the insurgency has taken hold, there have been significant barriers to recruitment in Pashtun areas. The international forces' training command has claimed to observe ethnic quotas, to avoid under- or over-representation. However the reality is that Hazara quotas for army recruitment are filled easily, while Pashtuns, in particular from the South West, are hard to recruit. In auxiliary services a generation of Hazara youths have offered their services as translators to international forces and in some of the mixed or Hazara-Pashtun border areas Hazaras have volunteered for militia units.

Civil society, media

The real Hazara progress has been in "soft power" fields rather than the security sector. The Hazara intelligentsia has been quick to take advantage of the space which opened up for civil society. Hazaras have established multiple cultural organizations, human rights groups, service oriented NGOs. The principal semi-state organization which has remained under Hazara leadership is the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, although the leadership has been careful to maintain a multi-ethnic staff composition. The Hazara tendency to excel in civil society extends beyond the capital, for example in the proliferation of Hazara community sports clubs, cultural associations and self-help groups in provincial capitals such as Ghazni, Herat and Mazar I Sherif. Three out of the eleven private newspapers monitored by the United Nations have an identifiably Hazara ownership. Three of the thirteen private TV stations are run

by Shias, although only one of these would be considered Hazara. Young Hazaras have been active in all aspects of the new media professions, as journalists, actors and producers.

Education

The most dramatic area of Hazara achievement has been in education. This has most graphically been illustrated by increases in school enrollment in Hazara majority areas and the high pass rates among Hazara students taking the university entrance examination, “concord”. For example, a Hazara veteran of the civil wars, who was part of the political maneuverings which preceded the fall of the Taliban eventually found his way into directing one of the largest secondary schools recruiting from Hazara areas. He clearly articulates his view of education as the route for Hazaras out of historical marginalization¹⁸. The massive demand for education in Hazara communities has also been visible in the private sector, with numerous tuition centres springing up in Hazara areas of Kabul and other cities, to boost students’ performance in secondary education. The Hazara penetration of higher education has been based upon long term receptivity to education in the group. During the period 1979 to 1998, when Hazarajat was essentially cut off from central government, autonomous local administrations struggled to sustain education departments and a network of primary and secondary schools. After the Taliban took over in 1998 community pressure forced them to vary their education policies, so that even girls’ high schools kept their doors open in Jaghoray District. The undeclared Hazara campaign to produce a highly educated new generation comes at a time when the insurgency and disassociation from institutions of government have reduced education participation in Pashtun areas. Indeed the sense that Hazaras are using education as a tool for social progress may even be one of the factors which have latterly forced the Taliban to reign in their campaign against schools¹⁹.

Economy

The mainstays of the Hazara economy have traditionally been livestock and agriculture in the mountains, supplemented by migration to and laboring in the cities. All of these activities have benefitted from the relatively good security prevailing in Hazara hinterland and cities. Hazaras have not featured prominently in drug trafficking or military and government contracting, the most lucrative economic activities after 2001. However, at least the fact that the Hazara elite has had a foothold in the national system of patronage has provided some political protection to Hazara economic activity²⁰. Urban land development, drawing upon political protection, has been one of the main areas of investment in the post-2001 economy, a field in which former

¹⁸ (Oppel, 2010)

¹⁹ Taliban figures have claimed this in discussion with the author.

²⁰ (Ibrahimi, 2009)

commanders and power-brokers have been active. The most prominent Hazara property developer has been Haji Nabi, brother of Vice-President Khalili, who has been involved in high profile land acquisitions and development around the Kabul. Less prominently, there has been a significant migration of Hazaras to the outskirts of Herat, involving the acquisition of land and development of new communities. This is a continuation of the long term Hazara rural-urban migration but often involves migrants investing savings they have accumulated in Iran. The other way in which the post-2001 political order has impinged on access to land has concerned the long-running Hazara-kochi struggle over transit and grazing rights for nomadic flocks. In 2007 and 2008 the kochis' annual migration into Hazara areas resulted in violence (nomad attacks on Hazara villages) and mass Hazara protests. However, despite prevarication from the central government and Hazara complaints that they had been abandoned to their fate, the reality was that the political and security order placed limits on the nomad show of force. In contrast, in 1999, under Taliban rule, nomads were able to stage what amounted to a massive cattle raid on the Hazara territory.

4. Policy versus spontaneity – factors contributing to the rise of the Hazaras

Why were the Hazaras able to make such progress :

The Hazara incorporation into the national level patronage system was driven by arithmetic logic. Hazara numbers were needed to consolidate the regime. In the most basic terms, as the third-ranking ethnic group, the Hazaras had the numbers to play a role as king-maker. With Hazara support, the top group Pashtuns could obtain a majority. Without Hazaras the second-ranking group, Tajiks could not obtain a majority²¹. Public denial of ethnicity as a factor in politics meant that such calculations could rarely be aired publicly. Periodically electoral contests were decided by ethnic block-voting, such as during the 2003/2004 Constitutional Loya Jirga and the 2005 and 2010 parliamentary speaker elections. The fact that Hazara numbers could be so crucial in any vote provided a powerful incentive for the presidential palace to keep the Hazara elite bound to its patronage network.

Of all the major ethnic-linguistic groups, the Hazaras had the fewest culturally-based inhibitions about participating in the post-2001 dispensation. Some described the willingness of Hazara clergy and laity alike to engage with the new order as “adaptability”. In contrast, one of the thrusts of the insurgent campaign was to make the civilian population disengage from government and any program associated with government. This had most impact in Pashtun areas, and manifested itself in the low verified turn out in Pashtun areas in the 2009 and 2010 elections. Hazara rejection of the Taliban and their idea of an Islamic Emirate as an alternative

²¹ (Riphenburg, 2005) cites Posner 2003 for cross-country evidence showing that multi-ethnic polities may be more stable than those with a majority-minority split.

to the Bonn Order meant that it was impossible for Taliban to operate in Hazara areas. The Hazara imperviousness to insurgent appeal meant they had few scruples about joining the security forces or associating with the administration, while Pashtuns carried a heavy historical baggage of imagined obligation to defeat foreign armies, which insurgent propagandists sought to appeal to.

The electoral democracy that was so associated with the new order manifestly had wide appeal in the Hazara areas because it offered such an obvious way of escaping from the perceived historic exclusion and backwardness. Public discourse, especially in the early years, associated the new order with a modernist project involving democracy, rule of law, human rights, women's emancipation, international integration and economic liberalism. The modernizing project had significant appeal in Hazara intellectual circles. Ironically, exposure to Iranian society, which had embraced modernity to a far greater extent than rural Afghanistan, had increased Hazara receptivity to modernization. Defense of women's rights had already become part of Hazara political practice and identity, in the sense that Hazara parties had opposed restrictions imposed by the Taliban and the Sunni mujahideen parties before them. The idea of associating with an international political project was palatable in Hazara circles, where the traditional enemy was the Pashtuns or the Tajiks. Taken together, cultural influences and political traditions meant that Hazara elites were far less ambivalent about embracing the new order than were their peers in the other groups more steeped in traditional Afghan nationalism.

5. Policies

The policy instruments which have helped the Hazaras

The transformation of the status of Hazaras in Afghan society has been achieved not as an outcome of any conscious anti-discrimination policy but as a positive side effect of policies pursued for other reasons and as a result of the transformative efforts of the Hazaras themselves. The rise of the Hazaras could be thought of as the collateral "advantage" of the international intervention.

The military intervention itself delivered rapid and transformative benefits for much of the Hazara population. In 2001, in the final stages of the Taliban regime, the Hazarajat region faced a humanitarian crisis compounded by the ongoing conflict, in which Taliban forces had resorted to scorched earth tactics. The international intervention resulted in a rapid and relatively costless Taliban retreat from the region. In the decade following Hazarajat faced no major security threat. The region has enjoyed stability despite the rise of the insurgency in other regions, and insurgency associated skirmishes on the approaches to the region have so far proved containable.

The inclusion of Hazaras in the elite bargains and the national level patronage system has depended upon the basic democratic structure of the post-2001 set-up, as this created the incentive for the national authorities to pursue an inclusive approach. This democratic set-up can be traced back to a decision in the original Bonn conference to give a commitment to national elections, something which was reinforced in the constitution-making in 2003-4 and backed up by international community support of the election processes. Much has subsequently been written about the numerous flaws of the Afghan electoral system. However, despite the shortcomings, elections have served the Hazaras well. At the national level, they have benefited from the inclusive elements of the government's patronage practice and at the provincial level they have been able to assert themselves relative to other ethnicities.

The decision of the international community to establish a significant aid, security and diplomatic presence in Afghanistan as part of their intervention also benefited the Hazaras. The community's commitment to education and lack of scruples about associating with the international community have given Hazaras an advantage in seeking employment in the multiple institutions servicing the intervention.

However other policy decisions which might have been expected to benefit the Hazaras produced no positive outcome.

The Bonn Agreement included a commitment to conduct an internationally supported census. In the event there have been protracted preliminaries, but the census itself has never gone ahead. A census could have provided an objective basis for resource allocation between the administrative units, or indeed for further rationalization of those units. It would in effect have enabled the Hazaras and other ethnic groups to formalize their claims on resources and shares of political power. The postponement of the census has helped the government to keep the bargain between ethnic groups ambiguous, flexible and subject to the negotiation in its patronage dealings.

Finally, international assistance for reconstruction and development in the wake of the intervention could reasonably have been expected to have been targeted at the poorest area and population of the country – Hazaras of Hazarajat. However in the event only a tiny proportion of the assistance delivered in the intervention was devoted to poverty alleviation or made available to poor and peaceful regions. Instead the bulk of assistance resources were targeted at the center and at insurgency affected areas, a point repeatedly made by residents of peaceful Hazarajat.

6. Evidence of push-back

There is evidence that Hazara progress has provoked resentment among other ethnic groups. The implied new ethnic order, in which the Hazaras have gained a share of power and privilege is far from being universally accepted as natural or permanent. Examples of direct push-back have so far been relatively few and insufficient to threaten the Hazara position in the new dispensation. However ethnic polarization of national politics and the rise of a Pashtun grievance narrative indicate that the Hazara gains are under threat.

The most extreme example of backlash against the assertive Shia community came in the form of the multiple bomb attacks on the 2011 Ashura-Moharram commemorations²². The mainstream Taliban Movement was quick to condemn the attacks and it seems that they were the work of an extremist cell working within the insurgency. The highly visible Hazara approach to Moharram has generated complaints by non-Shias who feel that Hazaras are exploiting the rituals to assert themselves as a power in Kabul. Some of the complaints focus on the alleged Iranian role in sponsoring ceremonies. This fits into an established pattern. When the Hazara migration into Herat speeded up, there were rumours that Iranian agents were establishing a strategic presence in the region by financing Hazara land purchases. The suggestions were implausible because they implied that the Iranian government was providing generous assistance to returning refugees, something which contrasted directly with reports of harsh treatment to the refugees and returnees. Instead the anti-Hazara rumor was a way of expressing ethnic competition in the city.

There is also evidence that Hazaras have found it more difficult than the other groups to secure the political spoils they have sought in either elite bargains or electoral exercises. The parliament is supposed to offer confirmation votes to ministers selected by the presidency. The process includes a two stage bargain. In the first place ethnic power brokers cut their deal with the President for their nominees to be proposed as minister. But thereafter the candidates have to face the parliament and put together a majority. When President Karzai presented his cabinet, after the 2009 presidential elections, Hazara brokers found it impossible to get their nominees through the parliament. The coalition deals which successfully got other groups' nominees elected apparently broke down when it came to the turn of the Hazaras. At the heart of the prolonged political crisis which followed the 2010 parliamentary elections was a Pashtun rebellion against the Hazara victory in the mixed province of Ghazni. President Karzai's initial stance in backing judicial moves to overturn the election results was inspired by the idea that an election which gave Hazaras control of Ghazni, even if it was a legally valid result, would offend Pashtun sense of entitlement. The tussle provided a significant contrast of the working of discretionary executive authority and electoral democracy as Hazaras were not slow to point out that they were under-represented in the appointed district department heads.²³ At a micro level, the leading Hazara candidate from Urozgan

²² Guardian, December 6, 2011

²³ Ultimately a compromise was reached on the parliamentary results, leaving the Ghazni Hazara MPs in place. In the end it seemed that parliamentary representation in Ghazni was not a big enough issue to sustain Pashtun mobilization.

claimed, with ample evidence, that election authorities arbitrarily cancelled his votes when they faced the prospect that a high turn-out in the Hazara community could win him a seat in this Pashtun majority province.

The armed opposition campaign provides an obvious outlet for any anti-Hazara sentiment that the community's rise has provoked. There have been occasional acts of extreme violence in which Hazaras have complained of being specifically targeted. Most vulnerable have been Hazara communities living in enclaves surrounded by Pashtun areas where Taliban are active, or along ethnic frontlines²⁴. The most frequent of these have been summary executions after Taliban check posts have discovered Hazaras travelling on highways that they have targeted. A graphic example of this vulnerability was the 2011 kidnap and murder of a Hazara member of the Bamyan provincial council, who was travelling through ethnically mixed Parwan province en route between Kabul and Bamyan. Similarly Hazara travelers transiting Qarabagh District, between the national highway and Hazarajat, have also periodically come under attack. The patterns of violence are reminiscent of previous eras in which Hazarajat has come under siege along these routes.

Meanwhile insurgent propagandists have constructed a narrative which mirrors the official narrative of Kabul, insofar as it suppresses ethnic issues and tries to project a national stance. The bulk of material is in Pashto and employs cultural references which are meaningful for Pashtuns. But they mobilize Pashtuns against foreign armies and a corrupt government, without singling out a specific ethnic foe. Graphics lampoon all the regime-affiliated former mujahideen leaders, deliberately including those of all ethnic groups. Evidence of Taliban anti-Hazara feeling is more anecdotal, with leaders and commanders occasionally expressing resentment at the Hazara rise and committing themselves to overturn it as soon as possible.

Kabul-based observers have noted that after around 2009 political debate and action has gone through an ethnic polarization, with a heightened sense of group consciousness in all four major ethnic groups, and political leaders prepared to articulate ethnically framed grievances. However there is no easy indicator of the extent of the polarization or indeed of the factors driving it. The trend to resurgence of ethnic politics has been most simply manifest through the entry of ethnically charged issues into the public discourse. The language issue has long been a proxy for ethnic tensions.²⁵ Hazara partisans in the debate claim that Pashtun chauvinists seek to use the support of the presidential palace to pursue their historic mission of undoing Afghanistan's multi-cultural identity by promoting Pashto language and culture ahead of all others. As so often, the ethnic complaints mirror each other. Hazaras, and to some extent Uzbeks and Tajiks, complain that the executive is captured by Pashtun chauvinists, who risk the stability of the country, by promoting Pashtun interests ahead of all other groups. Pashtuns accuse leaders of the other groups of working to split the country by promoting federalism.

Fantasaize about population - census

²⁴ For example "Taliban kill 9 members of minority in ambush", Alissa Rubin in NYT, June 25 2010

²⁵ (Hyman, 2002) for a history of the role of Pashto language promotion in Afghan nationalism

7. Conclusion : sustainability of gains and prospects for Afghan pluralism

The Hazara progress in post-2001 Afghanistan has been remarkable. A community which could remember its elders serving as household slaves for the Pashtun royal family has positioned itself to play a pivotal role in national politics and to be a prime beneficiary of economic growth.

However much of the progress achieved in the decade after 2001 lacks any legal or institutional foundation and rests upon political praxis, driven by conditions all too likely to be temporary²⁶. This is the essence of the dilemma of the eager minority. Hazaras progressed by participating more enthusiastically than any other group in the political and social development processes of the post-Taliban system, while the largest ethnic group, the Pashtuns, grew increasingly reticent with regards to such processes. As the international intervention which under-pinned the decade long political order winds down, Hazaras are obliged to consider which of their gains they can hold onto and which are transient. But the international intervention on which the post 2001 order has rested is ultimately time-limited.

Most of the political spoils which the Hazaras have enjoyed have been handed out to the Hazara elite through the Presidential Palace's patronage system. It is doubtful that the conventions which have guided this deal-making will survive a presidential succession intact, much less if there is a major change in the political landscape, such as might occur if an end to the insurgency opens the way for increased Pashtun participation.

Despite their progress, Hazaras still include some of the poorest communities in the country and retain a stake in avoiding a return to old discriminatory practices. Therefore one of the most basic ways in which Hazaras could seek to protect their gains would be to open up the space for rational debate and scholarship on ethnic dimensions to social and economic development. The acquisition of data on remaining ethnic-based gaps in social and economic attainment could provide a basis for policy-making for affirmative action or anti-discrimination measures. One of the most far-reaching measures in this regard would be to proceed with the national census. Ethnically nuanced public debate on social development would of course involve a challenge to the convention of denial of ethnicity. For Hazaras, and other ethnic groups a census would be an obvious way to solidify their claim to some of the political and social gains they have made.

On elections, Hazara interests are best served by defending political space i.e. resisting any attempts either to suspend presidential elections or weaken the elected parliament. The logic of the ethnic arithmetic suggests that even if a new presidency tries to start from tabula rasa in terms

²⁶ (Simonsen, 2004) writing in the early stages of the Bonn process outlines ways in which ethnic inclusiveness could be promoted through provisions in the institution-building process. Although praxis has often been inclusive, the formal measures, such as proportional representation in elections, were never taken.

of the conventions of how power is distributed, they will be obliged to woo the Hazara elite in their attempts to maintain a majority.

The aspect of the Hazara progress which is likely to be sustainable, even in the face of changes in the political environment is educational attainment. This has been achieved through community solidarity and enterprise, rather than dependence on government patronage. It is interesting that when Pashtuns comment on the changing face of their Hazara neighbors, it is the Hazara investment in education which makes Pashtuns wonder whether one day Hazaras will rule them.

Traditionally the Afghan structural debates in politics concern decentralization versus centralization and meritocracy (“Shaista salari”) versus patronage (“wasita”). Both of these have implications for the future status of ethnic groups. Although the Hazaras are traditionally associated with support of decentralization, since 2001 their elites have pursued a pragmatic strategy, going along with the centralization pursued by the presidential team and focusing on getting a decent share in the associated patronage. One approach for Hazaras to institutionalize their gains would be to revert to pushing a decentralization agenda, as at some stage a centralized system is bound to provide a national administration that pursues a less benevolent approach to the Hazaras and other minorities than has the post 2001 administration. Shaista salary is the most bandied about reform idea but has proven difficult to implement in a meaningful form. Whereas Hazara leaders have called for decentralization they have a far less developed agenda on how to ensure that their people can compete on equal terms in the labor market. There is an obvious need to develop an Afghan anti-discrimination agenda, consisting of mechanisms which can work in the face of the prevalent practices of *wasita*.

The rise of the Hazara community since 2001 has been achieved through a combination of elite political strategy, bottom-up participation and a favorable political environment. Holding onto those gains will likewise depend upon development of Hazaras’ political strategy. Although pluralism is by no means secure in Afghanistan, the fact that Hazaras have pulled themselves up so much without facing a radical reaction offers hope. It remains to be seen how many of the conditions which have enabled Hazaras to make this progress outlive the political and security transition which the country as a whole is scheduled for in 2014.

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