The Political and Institutional Roots of Afghanistan's Regime Collapse (2001–2021)

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Praise be to God, Lord of the universe. The Most Gracious, the Most Merciful (Qur'an 1:1–2).

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Abstract

This thesis examines the paradox of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's 2021 collapse: how a state that received massive international support for more than twenty years could so quickly fall to the Taliban insurgency. Existing literature collectively emphasises incapacity as a key driver of conflict and subsequent collapse. Building on this, I argue that the leading explanation for this long war is "political reluctance," underpinned by Pashtun ethnonationalism, enabled by constitutional centralisation, and nurtured by international support. This pattern stemmed from the Muhammadzai Model of Governance (MMG), with Afghan nationalism as its guiding principle. Unlike other ethnic groups, such as Hazaras, Tajiks, Uzbeks and marginalised Pashtun tribes who largely remained aligned with the Republic, Pashtun tribes provided both sides of the conflict - the President and the insurgents. Nonetheless, Pashtun Presidents' co-ethnic solidarities shaped selective engagements with the Pashtun Taliban, which softened meaningful suppression. This research employed a single-case and process-tracing approach to analyse historical archives, constitutional documents, SIGAR reports (2001-2023), and academic and media sources. It examines three corresponding mechanisms: first, the fraternal discourse that depicted the Taliban as "brothers", fellow Afghans and armed opponents; second, the 2004 Constitution's centralisation, which enabled selective confrontation with minimal accountability; and third, U.S. aid flows that incentivised both sides of the conflict to endure rather than resolve it. These mechanisms were mutually reinforcing, creating symbiotic economic ties in which the President's political calculations aimed not to jeopardise the Taliban's survival, while making foreign aid flows under their control by tolerating a certain level of conflict to continue. The Taliban also accessed the same aid resources through their shadow regime. The Republic assumed that the existing state of affairs would continue as it was, ignored the U.S. policy shift, and took this risky political gamble, bypassing the U.S.-led coalition's counterinsurgency expectations. Ultimately, neither President was able to secure a base among their co-ethnic insurgents, but both lost international backing, leading to their abrupt withdrawal and the fall of the Afghan state. This research concludes that the collapse was due to political factors rather than military ones, so that both Afghan presidents committed "political suicide" through their double counterinsurgency strategies at the expense of state stability.

Keywords: Political reluctance; state collapse; state-building; Afghanistan; Afghan nationalism; Pashtun ethnonationalism; executive centralisation; political economy of aid; insurgency; Taliban; U.S. withdrawal.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In August 2021, the Taliban fighters triumphed in Kabul almost unopposed, and within days, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan collapsed. Two decades of the U.S.-led coalition's state-building, backed by its massive resources - over $2.3 trillion in U.S. war expenditures - evaporated in a few days (Crawford & Lutz, 2021; Sharan, 2022; SIGAR, 2021). On paper, the Republic held an extensive apparent material advantage. The Afghan army, though it included inflated rosters and "ghost soldiers," numbered around 300,000 military personnel. Additionally, the Republic enjoyed billions of dollars in advanced weaponry and platforms, which contained tens of thousands of vehicles, hundreds of thousands of small arms, and an air fleet of more than 160 U.S.-supplied aircraft (SIGAR, 2021, 2022a, 2023). On the other side, the Taliban had around 60,000 to 65,000 fighters (estimates vary), while being supported by an extensive facilitation network, mainly relying on light weapons and high mobility (Cordesman, 2019; Giustozzi, 2019). The speed of the events shocked the world and disclosed a paradox: despite possessing enormous military, financial, and international assistance, the Republic proved unable or perhaps unwilling to resist for its survival (Malkasian, 2021; Murtazashvili, 2022; Sultani, 2025). The current research collectively blames state incapacity; however, other evidence points to deliberate hesitation and strategic tolerance, in which leaders intentionally chose not to mobilise capabilities and resources fully against the Taliban. So, this dispute between "incapacity" and possible "reluctance" lies at the heart of this thesis.

Debates about collapse involve several interconnected lines of argument. The first line emphasises the state's long-standing institutional weaknesses, such as poor rule of law, over-centralisation, and hollowed-out institutions, which were diagnosed earlier by Goodson (2001) and Jones (2008) and later affirmed by analyses such as Murtazashvili (2022) and SIGAR (2022). The second stress is on heavy dependency on foreign support and external security guarantees, which left Kabul unable to stand on its own (Eikenberry, 2013; Jones, 2008; Murtazashvili, 2022; SIGAR, 2022c). The third line of scholars contends that the abrupt U.S. withdrawal and the rapid evacuation of contractor personnel rapidly lowered Afghan soldiers' morale and also altered elites' patterns of loyalty (Murtazashvili, 2022; SIGAR, 2022a, 2023). The fourth line highlights insurgent strengths, including the Taliban's resilience, rigid ideology, ability to mobilise resources, Pakistani sanctuary and backing (Abbas, 2014; Giustozzi, 2019; Goodson, 2001; T. H. Johnson, 2017; Marsden, 1998). Finally, a substantial

body of evidence, including SIGAR[1] evidence, blames the corruption and the misallocation of resources. It shows that significant international funds supported patronage networks, undermining institutions and legitimacy (Callen & Long, 2015; Murtazashvili, 2022; Sharan, 2022; SIGAR, 2016a, 2021; Sultani, 2025; Verkoren & Kamphuis, 2013). Although recognising these explanations, it is essential to note that they share a common emphasis on "incapacity", whether institutional, financial, or military, and tend to imply that the Republic could not act differently due to a lack of means or to circumstances.

I shift this focus from what the state could not do to what the leaders chose not to do, i.e. from military to political factors, specifically from "incapacity" to "political reluctance", claiming that leaders deliberately refrained from mobilising their available resources against the Taliban. In this way, the collapse reflects not only structural weakness but also the conscious choices of those at the centre of power. I argue that the leading cause of this long war is "political reluctance," underpinned by Pashtun ethnonationalism, enabled by constitutional centralisation, and nurtured by international aid. This pattern stemmed from the Afghan traditional template of governance, which this study terms the "Muhammadzai[2] Model of Governance" (MMG), with Afghan nationalism as its guiding principle.

I developed the concept of MMG through my study of Afghanistan's history, governance, and conflict. MMG is an analytical framework for understanding recurring patterns of governance and collapse, offering a structured vocabulary and criteria for interpretation, similar to those used in liberal democracy. Although academic sources discuss these issues, none have introduced MMG as a distinct explanation for Afghanistan's persistent conflict and collapses. In this thesis, I use MMG to organise and explain governance dynamics in Afghan history, developing it as a conceptual tool for analysis. While some elements of MMG can be observed in reality, the framework's purpose is to guide interpretation, not to serve as an empirical

[1] The Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, or in brief (SIGAR), is a U.S. government oversight body established by Congress in 2008 to audit and evaluate the effectiveness of U.S. reconstruction efforts for over two decades of its intervention in Afghanistan.

[2] Muhammadzai is a branch of the Barakzai lineage of the Durrani Pashtuns, who ruled Afghanistan from 1826 to 1973. Dost Mohammad Khan founded the dynasty and ruled over the Pashtun tribal federation. Later, Abd al-Raḥman Khan, a Muhammadzai prince, established a strong Pashtun-led centralised state under his clan. Other Muhammadzai rulers further reinforced Pashtun dominance by promoting Afghan nationalism. This clan depended heavily on foreign subsidies, particularly from British India, for over 150 years (Barfield, 2010; Gregorian, 1969; Rubin, 2002; Saikal, 2004).

pattern or philosophy. The other chapters show where governance aligns with MMG, but the framework itself is the analytical device, not an observed phenomenon or doctrine.

Given said above, this study claims that unlike other ethnic groups, such as Hazaras, Tajiks, Uzbeks and marginalised Pashtun tribes who largely remained aligned to the Republic (Barfield, 2022; Giustozzi, 2015; Schetter, 2003), certain Pashtun tribes provided both sides of the conflict - the President and the insurgents. Nonetheless, Pashtun Presidents' co-ethnic solidarities shaped selective engagements with the Pashtun Taliban, which softened the harshness of suppression and provided them a shared income scheme with the Republic in exchange for their loyalty. This condition created what I call symbiotic economic ties, a political environment where Afghan elites and the Taliban both gained from U.S. aid flows. The Pashtun president prioritised a narrow ethnic interest, aimed not to risk their Pashtun base, deliberately avoided, and often shielded intense confrontation against their co-ethnic Taliban. At the same time, the presidents also tolerated, and often maintained, a certain level of conflict to ensure that U.S. and international aid continued to flow in under their management. On the other side of the conflict, the Taliban also accessed the same aid resources via their shadow regime (Giustozzi, 2012; Jackson, 2018). Their commanders founded safe havens and broadened their influence, often with impunity, capitalising on the ongoing conflict not just to endure and thicken their territorial control but also to profit from aid meant for the Republic through methods such as taxation, contract redirection, and control of illicit markets. The Republic assumed that the existing state of affairs would continue as it was, ignored the U.S. policy shift, and took this risky political gamble, bypassing the U.S.-led coalition's counterinsurgency expectations. Ultimately, neither President was able to secure a base or loyalty among their co-ethnic insurgents, but both lost international backing. The U.S., frustrated with both the Republic and the ongoing conflict, looked for a quick and cheaper resolution. The prolonged conflict, in turn, fed the U.S. domestic political discourse of "endless wars," influencing the White House's decision to negotiate directly with the Taliban and ultimately to withdraw (United States Department of State, 2020). Thus, this unexpected U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan brought these economic ties to an abrupt end and state collapse. This study concludes that Afghan presidents committed "political suicide" through their double counterinsurgency strategies at the expense of the state's collapse.

In this research, political reluctance is a patterned choice—rhetorical, administrative, and operational—evident in discourse, decision-making, and resource allocation, whereby leaders avoided decisive mobilisation against the Taliban despite having the means to do so. It was not

simply a matter of indecision or absence of awareness. Rather, a deliberate political perspective shaped by ethnic identity, elite interests, and tactical objectives that favoured co-ethnic ties over the pursuit of absolute military victory. Afghan leaders frequently portrayed insurgents as "brothers" rather than enemies, an intended framing that reflected co-ethnic sympathies toward Taliban rank-and-file fighters (Ariana News, 2018; CBS News, 2013; BBC News, 2010). To analyse further this claim, the following sections identify three overlooked gaps. First, most studies neglect the role of intra-Pashtun dynamics in influencing selective engagement with insurgents. Second, although constitutional centralisation is widely criticised, few studies specifically link it to counterinsurgency failures. Third, although aid-fuelled corruption is well documented, little attention has been paid to how foreign assistance simultaneously nourished the long war between the two co-ethnic actors—the state and the Taliban.

Numerous studies point to ethnic divisions as the critical cause of Afghanistan's collapse. These divisions drive social fragmentation, damage state authority, decrease legitimacy, and create favourable conditions for insurgency and the state's collapse (Balkhi, 2023; Kamali, 2014; A. Khan & Wazir, 2021; M. F. Khan et al., 2021; Waseem et al., 2023). From this standpoint, the collapse of Kabul seemed inevitable. However, these studies forget to explain that most non-Pashtun groups, including Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks and marginalised Pashtun tribes with minimal leadership representation, largely remained aligned to the Republic and opposed the Taliban. So, it appears that the real division lies within the Pashtun tribes themselves (Barfield, 2022; Rubin, 2002).

Both adversaries, the Republic and the Taliban, were led mainly by Pashtun elites, indicating that the core problem was not diversity itself but rather divisions and conflicts within the Pashtun tribes (Barfield, 2010, 2022; Rubin, 2002). There were mainly two groups of Pashtun tribes fighting with each other: the aristocratic Kandahari Durranis, who aligned with the government, and marginalised Kandahari Pashtun tribes as well as the Ghilzai tribes (e.g., Hotak, Kharoti), who formed the Taliban's base (Abbas, 2014; Barfield, 2022; Saikal, 2004). In essence, Pashtun ethnonationalism influenced the orientation of Afghan political leaders toward the Taliban, promoting leniency to its field-level fighters and translating into state practices of tolerance and protection rather than decisive confrontation. Pashtun

ethnonationalism is often manipulated rhetorically as "Afghan[3] nationalism[4]", which functioned more as a euphemism for Pashtun domination than as a means of developing a genuine unity. Roy (1994) wrote that in Persian usage, the term "Afghan" is often used interchangeably with "Pashtun," emphasising how calls for unity have concealed the exclusivity of ethnic differences. Building on this, Rubin (2002), Barfield (2010), and Saikal (2004) show how such framing allowed Pashtun elites to legitimise their dominance through state institutions, tribal politics, and centralisation, while presenting the project as civic and inclusive for over two centuries.

This thesis, therefore, distinguishes analytically between Pashtun ethnonationalism as practice and Afghan nationalism as rhetorical framing. This duality between rhetoric and practice became embedded in Afghan governance, most clearly through what I call the MMG, which defined Afghanistan's modern state-building trajectory. By the MMG, I refer to a governance model established during the Muhammadzai dynasty, which ruled Afghanistan from 1826 to 1973, and carried forward by subsequent regimes until the Republic. It was based on Pashtun primacy, executive centralisation, and reliance on foreign patronage (Barfield, 2010; Rubin, 2002; Saikal, 2004). The model promoted Afghan nationalism as a principal state ideology and national interest, depending on two main pillars: "Afghanism[5]", emphasising

[3] In Persian, Afghan traditionally refers to the Pashtuns (Barfield, 2010). However, in the 20th century, the Muhammadzai dynasty developed it into a civic identity as a national label for all citizens, regardless of ethnicity, formalised by the 1964 Constitution, Article 1, which states: "The Afghan nation is composed of all those individuals who possess the citizenship of the State of Afghanistan (Constitution of Afghanistan, 1964, Article 1; Gregorian, 1969; Barfield, 2010).

[4] Afghan nationalism is a longstanding, state-sponsored initiative that desires to promote a single national Afghan identity, often at the expense of Pashtun tribes and other ethnic identities. However, it is officially promoted as an inclusive civic ideology; but it is historically rooted in the dominance of Pashtun elites, particularly the Muhammadzai dynasty (Rubin, 2002; Saikal, 2004). This nationalism is based on two main pillars: Afghanism, which links Pashtun identity directly to national identity (Barfield, 2010; Gregorian, 1969), and Islamism, which offers religious legitimacy (Barfield, 2010; Roy, 1994). It serves both as a state ideology and as a vehicle for national interests, legitimising centralisation, elite dominance, and reliance on external patronage.

[5] Afghanism was the Muhammadzai dynasty's civic project in the twentieth century that redefined Pashtun identity (Muhammadzai identity) as a national identity. It was publicised through symbolic nation-building activities like flags, anthems, and the designation of "Afghan" as the national identity, along with constitutional reforms, expanded education, and the centralisation of the bureaucracy (Gregorian, 1969; Rubin, 2002; Saikal, 2004). Habibullah Khan launched this campaign, which grew under Amanullah Khan's 1923 Constitution. The peak was during the 1964 Constitution, which established a legal framework that officially defined Afghanism as a state unifying ideology for all citizens regardless of their background, combining Pashto promotion, Islamic legitimacy (Sunni branch), and centralised governance (Barfield, 2010; Saikal, 2004).

Pashtun identity as the national identity (Gregorian, 1969), and "Islamism[6]", which offered religious legitimacy to maintain that dominance (Roy, 1994). Afghan nationalism legitimised Muhammadzai dominance, centralisation, and the external rentier dynasty that underpinned Afghan state-building for over 150 years (Rubin, 2002).

The MMG has begun its political journey from the late nineteenth-century project of "Afghanisation[7]," the deliberate privileging of Pashtun identity as the foundation of statehood, through successive reinterpretations: "Afghanism," "monarchy's ethno-civic nationalism," "republican Pashtun nationalism," "ethno-communist nationalism," "Mujahideen ethno-jihadist nationalism,", and "Talibanist Nationalism[8]," before finally reappearing as what this study conceptualises as "brotherhood nationalism[9]" under Hamid Karzai (2001-2013) and Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai (2014-2021), whose rhetoric cast the Taliban as "brothers" and "fellow Afghans," thereby softening the language of enmity. These rulers heavily relied on foreign subsidies, initially from British India and later from the Soviet Union and the United States, which backed their centralisation, which would have been fiscally unsustainable otherwise (Barfield, 2010; Rubin, 2002; Saikal, 2004). Therefore, the enduring legacy of the MMG is reflected as a Pashtun-centric framework that, for over two centuries, perpetuated Afghanistan's recurrent cycles of conflict, insurgency, and state collapse. This study introduces

[6] Islamism was the Muhammadzai dynasty's state-building project to legitimise their political authority by employing religion and depicting the ruler as both the defender of Islam and the unifier of the nation. It linked state sovereignty to divine authority and supported centralised power. From Abd al-Raḥman Khan's attempts to unify religion, through Amanullah's modernisation reforms, to the subsequent adoption of Islamic constitutions, Islamism, a complementary pillar to Afghanism, has been a key factor in the Muhammadzai dynasty's monopolisation of power (Gregorian, 1969; Rubin, 2002; Saikal, 2004).

[7] Afghanisation/Pashtunisation: A coercive, rentier-based campaign of the Muhammadzai state-building project, which Abd al-Raḥman Khan (1880–1901) initiated, deliberately appointed loyal Pashtun tribes in governance and military recruitment, land settlement (especially in the north) to exile dissident Pashtun tribes and was nourished by British India subsidies, thereby setting Pashtun dominance as the heart of Afghan statehood (Barfield, 2010; Gregorian, 1969; Rubin, 2002).

[8] Talibanist nationalism is an extreme ethno-Islamist ideology that strengthens previous Pashtun-centred structures by merging ethnic dominance with religious authoritarianism. While recruitment is primarily ethnic, it rhetorically promotes violent radical Islamism as a unifying principle among members, as seen in the Taliban's actions in the 1990s and after 2021 (Abbas, 2014; Giustozzi, 2019; Jackson, 2018; T. H. Johnson, 2017).

[9] Brotherhood nationalism is a rhetorical and state strategy used by Karzai and Ghani. It minimised coercion against the Taliban by portraying the insurgents as "brothers" and "unhappy brothers" within the national community, rather than as existential enemies (SIGAR, 2021, 2023; Mukhopadhyay, 2014).

the concept of political reluctance, which Afghan scholarship often overlooks yet remains central to both the post-2001 counterinsurgency efforts and the eventual collapse of the state.

The second gap examines the overlooked association between constitutional design and counterinsurgency strategies. In 2004, the U.S. worked with Afghan technocrats and officials to draft a new constitution as the foundation of a democratic Afghan government. Very soon, much criticism arose due to a power imbalance, a weak parliament, and the absence of an effective mechanism for state accountability and deficits in the functioning of the "Loya Jirga[10]" (Duryea, 2022; Kamali, 2014; Murtazashvili, 2022; S. Smith, 2019) and comparative studies on state-building in heterogeneous societies indicate that highly centralised systems often promote domination and ethnic politics rather than inclusive governance (Horowitz, 2000; Lijphart, 1977; Reilly, 2001). In practice, the Constitution endowed the presidency with substantial powers (Constitution of Afghanistan, 2004, Articles 60–66, 69, 79), enabling the President to appoint all military and civilian officials, including provincial and district administrators, to issue decrees, and to extend states of emergency with little oversight. Also, impeachment proved politically difficult, allowing the President to function more like a dictator than a democratically elected leader. More importantly, this Constitution enabled bias in the decision-making process in security policies. Since there were no strict limits on presidential power, presidents often exploited these loopholes to tolerate or even shield co-ethnic Taliban fighters, while pushing aside political opposition with little pushback. Hence, sufficient attention should be paid to the links between the constitutional design and counterinsurgency.

The third gap highlights the often-overlooked political economy of aid. Current research indicates that foreign aid in fragile states can promote corruption, distort motivations, foster rent-seeking behaviour, and potentially prolong conflicts (Ambassa et al., 2024; Asatullaeva et al., 2021; Cooper, 2018; de Ree & Nillesen, 2009; Dube & Naidu, 2014; Fishstein & Wilder, 2012). Afghanistan is a case in point. From 2001 to 2021, aside from the international community, only the U.S. delivered more than $145 billion in reconstruction funds, in addition to massive security assistance (SIGAR, 2016a, 2022c, 2023). However, studies argue that the

[10] The Loya Jirga (Grand Council) has traditionally been a consultative assembly of Pashtun tribal elders, particularly from Afghanistan's southern and southeastern areas. Articles 110-115 of the Constitution describe it as "the Loya Jirga is the highest manifestation of the will of the people", with power over constitutional revisions, issues of national sovereignty, and impeachment proceedings against the President as outlined in Article 69. However, in practice, it is typically called upon by the President, which limits its independence.

Afghan traditional rentier system enriched Afghan officials, empowered the Taliban, and perpetuated the conflict through foreign aid (Fishstein & Wilder, 2012; Goodhand & Sedra, 2009; Verkoren & Kamphuis, 2013). Along the pathway towards sustainable stability through transparent political institutions, foreign assistance also fostered symbiotic economic ties between the conflict factions (government elites and insurgents) providing both sides with incentives and capabilities to perpetuate the conflict rather than resolve it. For the Republic, aid became a tool of political power, channelled into patronage and rent-seeking networks, rewarding loyalists, inflating payrolls, and providing opportunities for corruption and unsustainable institution-building (SIGAR, 2021; Fishstein & Wilder, 2012; Goodhand & Hakimi, 2014). Low-intensity conflict was tolerated as long as aid continued, avoiding meaningful confrontation with the Taliban whenever it threatened external interests' support. These mechanisms benefited both the government and the insurgents. The Taliban, on the other hand, established a shadow regime that generated revenue from the areas under their control through control of aid-funded infrastructure. This effectively turned foreign assistance into a reliable source of funding for their insurgency (Giustozzi, 2019; Jackson, 2018). As a result, aid not only destabilised the region but also provided economic incentives and means for ongoing violence. Thus, sufficient attention should be paid to how foreign aid fostered conditions that prolonged the conflict for almost twenty years.

To address these gaps, this study compares two foremost theoretical debates in the field of ethnicity and conflict. The first line of argument discusses "primordialism" versus "constructivism" and "modernism". Primordialists claim that ethnic identity is an inherent and enduring characteristic of human societies (A. D. Smith, 1989; Geertz, 1963), whereas constructivists consider it as contingent, strategically mobilised or manipulated by elites for political ends (Gellner, 1983; Anderson, 2008). Modernists emphasise that ethnic and national identities are products of state-building, mass communication, and institutional design (Breuilly, 1993; Hobsbawm, 1990). The situation in Afghanistan best exemplifies a blend of constructivist and modernist perspectives. Successive rulers adopted Afghan nationalism as a civic ideal, disguising its ties to Pashtun identity in everyday political language. However, in practice, it continued to function as a mechanism of Pashtun domination and control. So, this bragging of Afghan nationalism as a national objective encouraged authorities to engage with the Taliban selectively due to ethnic solidarity. Ethnicity, therefore, was neither fixed nor purely symbolic. It was actively mobilised and embedded in state institutions, which harboured symbiotic economic ties between co-ethnic adversaries and deepened political reluctances. The

second debate discusses the theories of institutional "integrationist" and "accommodation" in heterogeneous societies. Integrationist suggests that centralisation can more effectively promote unity and a shared identity (Horowitz, 2000). In contrast, accommodation emphasises that power-sharing and the recognition of diversity are essential for maintaining stability (Lijphart, 1977). Nonetheless, the Afghan Constitution (2004) adopted an integrationist model with extensive centralising powers vested in the presidency. Research warns that centralisation in deeply divided societies can lead to elite control, lowered accountability, and increased exclusion (Reilly, 2001). However, the Afghan Constitution design enabled elites to pursue their biased counterinsurgency strategies with minimum opposition, so it instead guided the nation towards peace and stability, ultimately leading to its collapse.

The implications of these theoretical debates are central to the research design of the study. The perspectives of primordialism, constructivism, and modernism acknowledge that elite rhetoric and identity framing are employed strategically by state institutions, rather than being fixed. Shifts in discourse and alliances should therefore correspond with selective engagement with the Taliban, for example, when presidents publicly invoked what this study terms "brotherhood nationalism" to legitimise the toleration of insurgents. The outcome of the debate between integration and accommodation indicates that centralised authority in diverse societies enables elites to prioritise co-ethnic interests, thereby hindering inclusive peace and security. These debates show how identity, state-building, and foreign aid intersected to create a hesitant regime, where ethnonationalism offered rhetorical backing, centralisation delivered institutional protection, and aid guaranteed access to resources. These mechanisms formed symbiotic economic ties, encouraging both parties in the conflict to prolong the war rather than seeking a resolution. The state's elites kept U.S. aid flows, supported their political dominance, and nurtured rent-seeking loyalists. On the other side, the Taliban also gained from these aid flows, acting as a shadow regime by collecting taxes and generating revenue, while expanding their territory and assuring their survival with nearly impunity. These debates, in theory, prompted the formulation of the main research question of this thesis: How did the post-2001 Afghan state, which received massive international support for more than twenty years, not only fail to defeat the Taliban insurgency but also fall so quickly in 2021?

To answer the above research question, this study hypothesises that political reluctance—rather than incapacity—was the determining factor in sustaining Afghanistan's prolonged conflict. Due to ethnic solidarity, the Afghan government often tolerated—and at times protected—the insurgents, discouraging intense confrontation. However, while ambivalent

leaders hesitated to act beyond their ethnic interests, aid dependency reflected their fear of disrupting the aid flows that sustained their power. Pashtun elites grew cautious to justify the flow of assistance by either tolerating or maintaining a level of conflict without jeopardising their co-ethnic insurgents' survival. Nevertheless, ethnonationalism and foreign aid both motivated and provided resources for escalating intra-Pashtun rivalries between the aristocratic Kandahari Durranis elites within the state and the marginalised Kandahari Pashtuns tribes as well as the Ghilzai tribes, on the Taliban's side. Thus, these two Pashtun tribal confederations competing over foreign aid sharpened their rivalry, sustaining the insurgency and violent conflict. This situation prolonged the conflict far beyond what material balances of power would predict and nurtured the U.S. discourse of "endless wars." Even substantial investments, such as the U.S. troop surges from 2009 to 2011, did not change the resolve of short-sighted and ambivalent Afghan leaders. Foreign intervention produced only temporary improvements because Afghan leaders did not take firm action against the insurgents, assuming the existing order would remain the same and were unprepared for the U.S. shift. Frustrated with the ongoing war, the U.S. moved from engagement to reluctance. Because of increasing internal pressure for a quick resolution, Washington sought direct negotiations with the Taliban. Ultimately, the U.S. and the Taliban reached a deal through the 2020 Doha Peace agreement, which involved limited Afghan state participation. This action further undermined Kabul's credibility and signalled that the U.S. prioritised withdrawal over victory. The U.S. reluctance in its long-running conflict led to an abrupt withdrawal. This not only ended the war economy but also pushed its local counterinsurgency partner, the Republic, into an unexpected collapse.

The argument presented here makes two main contributions. In conflict studies, it is suggested that resource shortages or capabilities alone do not fully explain Afghanistan's collapse. Instead, elite strategies grounded in ethnic identity, institutional structures, and foreign subsidies, deeply rooted in MMG's historical customs, precipitated the collapse. In the area of comparative politics, it places Afghanistan within a broader context of failed counterinsurgency efforts and state-building in heterogeneous societies such as British Malaya, Soviet Afghanistan, U.S. interventions in Vietnam and Iraq, and more recent examples in Somalia and South Sudan (de Waal, 2014; Menkhaus, 2014; Rolandsen & Kindersley, 2017; Thompson, 1966; Trinquier, 2006; Westad, 2005). Notably, Afghanistan is a unique case that shows how the combination of ethnonationalism, a rentier state, a highly centralised political institution, and unprecedented international aid has driven reluctance among domestic and

international actors, bypassed international oversight, and significantly hampered counterinsurgency efforts. This insight is neglected mainly in state-building debates.

The importance of this analysis is in emphasising that the collapse of Afghanistan was more due to deliberate choices by its elite than a lack of capability. By examining ethnic politics, constitutional design, and the political economy of aid, this analysis shows how political hesitation led both domestic and international actors to refrain from confronting the insurgent advance, despite having sufficient resources. It also examines how state ideology influences elite behaviour and, in turn, shapes institutional outcomes. It underscores the significance of countervailing ideological forces in publicising more inclusive, resilient, transparent, and accountable political cultures. It also uncovers that, in the absence of politically balanced and responsible systems, it can increase the risk of ethnic dominance and self-interest elitism. Foreign intervention motivated by short-term objectives could exacerbate domestic divisions and jeopardise long-term stability. There should be discussions on how to align external aid with the host country's interests. Thus, this study raises awareness of the potential hazards linked with future interventions in heterogeneous nations such as Iraq, Syria, Nigeria, Sudan and Myanmar, where the politicisation of identity and interactions with foreign aid can exacerbate instability. By examining Afghanistan from this perspective, significant insights can be drawn to avoid similar failures and to develop political systems and aid policies that minimise elite incentives to perpetuate conflict.

Finally, this thesis is presented in six chapters, each building on the previous one to develop and test the central argument of political reluctance. This section, as Chapter 1, set out the background, outlined the research problem, and formulated the main and subsidiary questions. The broad question is to investigate the reasons behind the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in 2021, focusing on how ethnic ethnonationalism, constitutional centralisation, and aid dependency fostered symbiotic economic ties between the conflicting sides. These ties extended the conflict, resulting in the loss of international support for the hollowed-out Afghan state against the Taliban resistance that forced it to a sudden end.

In addition, it underscores the significance of academic and policy discussions and situates the study within the wider literature on conflict, ethnicity, constitutional design, and aid dependency. It concludes by emphasising the main gaps and outlining the thesis's contribution. Chapter 2 presents a single-case process-tracing methodological approach best suited to this study's purpose, introduces the study's MMG historical lens, and explains the

sources, selection criteria, and strategies to reduce bias. Chapter 3 traces the development of Afghan nationalism (Pashtun ethnonationalism) and ethnic politics from 1747 onwards to 2021. It emphasises the presidencies of Karzai and Ghani, focusing on the root causes of their reluctance and biased associations with the Taliban and justifying their sympathetic campaigns for the Taliban's rank-and-file fighters. Chapter 4 reviews the 2004 Constitution, the backbone of U.S. state-building in Afghanistan, which characterised the Afghan state through highly centralised executive authority. This structure enabled the presidents to prioritise their narrow ethnic interests, dominance, reduced accountability, and paralysed international support, which eroded international and local counterinsurgency efforts, an international intervention that this study calls "state-building for collapse". Chapter 5 explores the unintended effects of the political economy of aid in Afghanistan, showing that it often benefited both co-ethnic adversaries. It created symbiotic economic ties between the Republic elites and the Taliban, which prolonged the conflict. Chapter 6 concludes the thesis and results, highlights its theoretical contributions, engages with alternative explanations, narrates the U.S. shift from engagement to reluctance and withdrawal, and offers policy lessons and implications for future interventions. It terminates with recommendations and avenues for future research.

Chapter 2: Research Design

This chapter explains the research design, the selected methodology, and the rationale for choosing Afghanistan as a single case study. It describes how evidence was identified, screened, organised, and analysed to investigate how ethnonationalism, executive centralisation, and foreign aid prolonged Afghanistan's conflict and contributed to its collapse in 2021. It provides a basis for empirical analysis for the subsequent chapters. To this end, the chapter is presented in three parts. First, Section One explains process tracing and the single-case approach and introduces the MMG historical lens for the study. Section Two describes case selection, justification, and data collection, with emphasis on identifying, selecting, and excluding sources, and particular attention to the data's relevance and reliability. Attention is also given to data organisation and analysis methods that facilitate a systematic review of the findings. Section Three evaluates the study's quality and credibility by examining reliability, validity, and ethical standards, and also discusses limitations and the researcher's positionality, providing transparency about potential biases. The chapter concludes with a summary of the main points and emphasises that the study's methodological basis is reliable and replicable.

2.1 Process-tracing and Single Case Approach

This study is qualitative and employs process tracing and case studies. To understand outcomes such as the Republic's collapse, it is necessary to go beyond simple correlations and to rebuild the mechanisms linking identity, institutions, and aid over time. This approach is appropriate because it allows for the systematic reconstruction of causal sequences and facilitates the assessment of evidence through explicit tests instead of relying on a non-structured narrative. Also, George and Bennett (2005) support the use of the case study approach, justifying that analyses within a single case may reveal dynamics that larger-N methods might miss. In Eckstein's (2000) terms, Afghanistan is a crucial case that demonstrates how a state can collapse despite substantial international support. If political reluctance can account for failure in such favourable circumstances, it suggests that this idea has wider relevance for comparison in similar settings (George & Bennett, 2005; Eckstein, 2009).

Following Mahoney (2007, 2015), Collier (2011), and Bennett and Checkel (2014), this study employs an explanatory-outcome process-tracing approach to illustrate Afghanistan's

exact course to its collapse, rather than developing universal laws. Beach and Pedersen (2013), who advocate the sequencing and mechanism-driven analysis, endorse the study's aim of exploring how these three mechanisms of identity, constitutional design, and aid interacted to foster reluctance at all levels of the Republic. In other words, process-tracing is quite suitable for this research for three main reasons. At the outset, it focuses on mechanisms rather than correlations, showing how identity, institutions, and aid have collaborated to foster political reluctance for more than 20 years. Then, it utilises materials such as presidential rhetoric, decrees, and SIGAR audits, which serves to research mechanisms rather than merely providing background context. Finally, this approach makes claims more reliable by testing them through four classic process-tracing tests (Mahoney, 2007, 2015; D. Collier, 2011; Bennett & Checkel, 2014; Beach & Pedersen, 2013).

This analysis utilises the four classic process-tracing tests (Mahoney, 2015; Van Evera, 1997). "Hoop test" assesses the viability of a hypothesis. If it fails the test, it undermines the claim, but passing the test does not necessarily confirm its correctness. For example, if Afghan leaders had never called the Taliban "brothers," the reluctance hypothesis would be significantly diminished. "Smoking-gun tests" strongly support a claim when available, but their absence does not necessarily disprove it. The presidential decrees that release the Taliban detainees serve as convincing evidence of reluctance. "Straw-in-the-wind tests" modestly raise or lower confidence. Finally, "Doubly decisive tests" simultaneously confirm one hypothesis while disconfirming alternatives. Elite revelations indicating that co-ethnic ties limited confrontation support the explanation of reluctance and undermine claims that rely solely on incapacity as the main driver of collapse.

This research utilised presidential speeches, detainee-release decrees, SIGAR audits, and media investigations to demonstrate how reluctance was described, institutionalised, and maintained. This strategy supports the reconstruction of elite decision-making beyond interviews and turns documentary sources into valid analytical data. Additional standards also enhance the research design. It follows Yin (2018) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) by emphasising transparency, triangulation, and trustworthiness. Evidence is triangulated against multiple sources, and both cases that confirm expectations and those that contradict them are considered to enhance credibility of research. Also, as Pierson (2004) emphasises, by explaining how earlier institutional decisions could result in path-dependent outcomes, the study enhanced the research design. For example, the 2004 Constitution can help explain why the Republic collapsed rapidly when the president fled the country. Meanwhile, Brubaker

(2004) argues that ethnicity should be analysed as a practice and discourse rather than as a fixed essence. These inputs qualified the study to focus on a single case and process-tracing the association between identity and institutions that have evolved over almost 20 years, from 2001 to 2021 (Yin, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Pierson, 2004; Brubaker, 2004).

Overall, this study employs process tracing and a single-case methodology to analyse Afghanistan's collapse as a consequence of a path-dependent strategy. It focuses on mechanisms over correlations, relies on documentary evidence for analysis, and applies traditional process-tracing tests. In addition, the research design is complemented by additional methodological commitments to establish an organised and transparent framework for examining the interactions among Afghan elites' discourse, institutional design, and aid dependence that led to persistent political reluctance.

2.2 The MMG Historical Lens

This study draws on constructivism, modernism, and Afghanistan's historical institutionalism to introduce a historical-lens framework: the "Muhammadzai Model of Governance" (MMG). I developed the MMG concept by examining Afghanistan's history, governance, nationalism, conflict, and collapse. In studying Afghanistan's domestic and international political history, I identified a recurring pattern of governance and collapse. While academic sources have attempted to explain this phenomenon, none have defined it as a distinct political term or epistemology for Afghan governance, nor have they offered a specific explanation for the persistent conflict and frequent collapses in Afghanistan.

Existing historical and academic sources recognise that identity is politically sensitive, particularly in its association with power and resource distribution throughout Afghan history; however, I draw on social constructivist work on ethnic identity and kinship, literature on historical institutionalism, and, from a rationalist perspective, consider how aid shapes incentive structures in Afghanistan. In other words, ethnicity is central in Afghanistan, but its influence is shaped and tempered by strategic incentives such as foreign aid and opportunity structures like political institutions.

For example, although the 2004 Constitution was intended to introduce democracy and limit presidential power, it ultimately followed the monarchical style of governance that has persisted in Afghanistan for the past 250 years. A strong correlation also exists between the rise and fall of Afghan governments and the influence of foreign aid from the British Empire,

which facilitated the birth of the Afghan government in 1880, through the Soviet era, and most recently, U.S. aid. These three elements of identity, centralisation, and foreign aid collectively define the fate of Afghan governments. While current scholarship discusses these factors separately, I collectively term them the core of the MMG, which I argue is the main reason for the rise and fall of Afghan governments, especially the most recent collapse. The MMG describes a governance system that has evolved historically over time. It is characterised by three corresponding features: Pashtun dominance in political identity, a centralised executive authority, and dependence on foreign aid for financial support and legitimacy (Barfield, 2022; Rubin, 2002; Saikal, 2004).

Likewise, these three essential mechanisms during Karzai and Ghani's leadership reemerged as fraternal discourse, institutional centralisation, and aid dependency. On a discursive level, both presidents consistently called the Taliban insurgents brothers, instead of viewing them as real enemies. At the institutional level, the Constitution's centralisation of power in the presidency enabled selective enforcement. At the resource level, substantial international aid inflows fostered symbiotic economic ties across the conflict lines. Thus, abstracted in this way, fraternity discourse, selective enforcement, and aid dependency jointly constitute a generalisable model of political reluctance.

These mechanisms enable political reluctance and restore the tradition of MMG custom and the state ideology of Afghan nationalism, which prioritises co-ethnic solidarity over effective coercion. Furthermore, these three mechanisms form a self-reinforcing cycle. Thus, the Republic's collapse can be explained well through the micro-logic of political reluctance, in which its three mechanisms of fraternity discourse, selective enforcement, and aid dependency jointly operated together to discourage meaningful confrontation. This conceptualisation highlights the historical continuity of a governance framework that has influenced Afghan state formation from the late 19th century to the Republic era (2001–2021). It offers the historical perspective used in this study to examine how identity, institutions, and international aid interact to sustain patterns of conflict, political hesitancy, and state collapse, as discussed further in Chapter 3.

2.3 Case Selection and Data

2.3.1 Case Selection and Justification

This study selected Afghanistan (2001–2021) as a single case for three related reasons. First, it acts as a prominent example in the examination of fragile states (George & Bennett, 2005). Despite receiving outstanding levels of foreign assistance, the Afghan state ultimately collapsed. If foreign aid, military intervention, and institutional reform were sufficient conditions for stability, then Afghanistan should not have been likely to fail. Its collapse poses a rigorous challenge to existing theories of state-building, external intervention, and insurgency, revealing their limitations in explaining this phenomenon.

Second, Afghanistan provides a vital example for improving theoretical frameworks (Eckstein, 2009). The Republic's collapse presents an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the association among ethnic politics, centralised governance, and aid incentives in deeply divided societies. Although the findings may not be statistically generalisable, they provide analytical generalisation (Yin, 2018). The insights gained are relevant to other contexts with similar dynamics, such as Iraq's sectarian governance, Nigeria's centralised federalism, or Myanmar's military-led politics. In each of these cases, the reluctance of elites to confront co-ethnic networks, combined with the receipt of aid or resources, has influenced the trajectories of fragile states.

Third, the case is both temporally and substantively confined. It began in 2001 with the U.S.-led intervention establishing the Republic and ended in August 2021, when the Taliban took back control of Kabul and toppled the Republic. This period lasted nearly 20 years, allowing research to examine mechanisms during both the height of international state-building and the subsequent collapse. The study primarily examined the areas where hesitancy was most pronounced. For instance, key presidential decisions regarding the release of detainees, the centralisation of constitutional authority that empowered the executive, and the merging of aid with patronage networks are regarded as pivotal events. Likewise, battlefield tactics or the Taliban's second era following 2021 are beyond the scope of this research, as this study focuses on the strategies and institutions of political elites that led to the sudden collapse of the Republic, rather than military operations.

2.3.2 Sources: Identification, Selection, and Exclusion

This study gathered its relevant evidence through a staged, transparent process designed to enhance credibility, reliability, and replicability. I began by gathering relevant academic articles, peer-reviewed studies and scholarly debates related to my argument from reputable academic databases, such as JSTOR, Scopus, and Google Scholar. Meanwhile, I searched institutional repositories for relevant official reports, particularly those published by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), NATO[11]/ISAF[12], and UNAMA[13].

I focus exclusively on U.S. aid rather than international aid because the U.S. was the primary actor in Afghan politics from the invasion through to withdrawal. While other international partners accompanied the U.S. during the invasion of Afghanistan following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in New York, the US not only played a central role but also provided the largest share of aid to Afghanistan. Also, I accessed official documents through Afghan government archives and digital reproductions, including the 2004 Constitution and presidential decrees. To incorporate donor perspectives, I utilised declassified U.S. government documents, which provided key insights into how international actors viewed and influenced Afghan decision-making. At the same time, tracing citations from key monographs and journal articles helped incorporate secondary sources that were not accessible through formal databases. Moreover, the criteria for including and excluding sources were based on their origin and relevance. I used only sources from reputable institutions, peer-reviewed publications, or respected media outlets that directly relate to one of the three areas of the study of identity framing, constitutional centralisation, or aid incentives. In line with the exclusion criteria, I excluded sources that were unreliable or unverifiable, including anonymous blogs, unverified leaks, and obviously biased notes.

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[11] The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, known as NATO, was founded in 1949 as a collective defence alliance of European nations. It, together with the U.S., led military intervention in Afghanistan from 2003 to 2021.

[12] The International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF, in brief, was a NATO-led mission established by the UN in December 2001 to assist the Afghan government in maintaining security. Its mandate expanded from Kabul to the rest of the country, and between 2003–2014 it coordinated counterinsurgency operations and trained Afghan force, before transitioning to NATO's Resolute Support Mission.

[13] The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, or UNAMA in brief, was established in 2002 and has been coordinating international aid, supporting Afghan governance and elections, and monitoring human rights.

To grasp international and domestic perspectives on the Afghan conflict, I thoroughly reviewed media archives from domestic and global sources. However, managing these media sources required careful attention due to their broad range and diversity. Over a period of more than twenty years of conflict, Afghan and international sources have generated thousands of reports about Afghanistan. To keep this body of material analytically manageable, I systematically searched for keywords across major outlets, such as domestic ones, Ariana News[14] and TOLOnews[15], and international ones, BBC[16], Reuters[17], the New York Times[18], and the Washington Post[19], focusing on terms directly related to the three mechanisms of reluctance. I used the three mechanisms of identity, centralisation, and aid as keywords. I chose them based on a comprehensive literature review, prior research, the historical context of Afghanistan, and explanations from both domestic and international sources regarding the country's constant conflict and collapse, while complementary media analysis also helped me to select these mechanisms. To ensure these mechanisms were the most analytically useful for my study, I conducted a pilot search using a small sample of data. This pilot allowed me to test and refine the mechanism framework and to see how effectively each mechanism could explain the core argument of my research. After completing the pilot, I systematically analysed all relevant data sources using the refined set of critical keywords of ethnic politics, centralisation and aid dependency. In addition, I found only a limited number of international outlets, such as the Washington Post and the New York Times, which addressed all three mechanisms with the necessary depth and relevance. So, only one article from each of these outlets was included in the final bibliography.

Furthermore, I consider other criteria such as analytical depth, originality, and avoidance of duplication. The study ensured that the bibliography included only the most relevant and high-quality sources, rather than simply listing every available reference. These platforms were chosen for their international influence, regional presence, and, for domestic outlets, for their

[14] Ariana News is a local news channel specialising in politics and community stories.

[15] TOLOnews is a domestic channel providing 24-hour live news coverage.

[16] The BBC, or British Broadcasting Corporation, is an international news agency based in London, UK.

[17] Reuters is a news channel recognised for its brief, accurate reports and global coverage.

[18] The New York Times is a popular U.S. newspaper with investigative capabilities.

[19] The Washington Post is another popular U.S. newspaper with investigative capabilities.

established credibility in investigative journalism and their accessibility. I carefully considered that each international or domestic media outlet has its own limitations and biases, and that they primarily report events rather than underlying reasons.

The initial searches identified around 350 potentially relevant reports published from 2001 onward to 2021. This screening process occurred in two stages: first, I checked the relevance of the reports to the identified mechanisms; second, I assessed their credibility. Those reports focused solely on battlefield updates were excluded, and the partisan articles lack independent verification. The final dataset included around 100 media outlets, political speeches and SIGAR reports, evenly split between Afghan and international sources, enabling me to incorporate both local perspectives and external analyses. It is challenging to include every report from two decades of conflict. So, this systematic, staged methodology ensured comprehensive breadth of coverage and critical filtering. It means that another researcher could replicate the process to assemble a similar dataset. In addition, I collected and analysed sources in English, Dari, and Pashto. All translations were verified by both me and translation software to minimise semantic distortion and maintain conceptual consistency across the languages. When analysing elite rhetoric, it was crucial to consider symbolic terms, as they frequently held substantial political significance. For example, in Persian, the term “Afghan” is often used as a synonym for “Pashtun,” affecting how nationalism is expressed and perceived.

Among sources, the SIGAR reports are handy for this study because they provide comprehensive empirical insights into governance, aid flows, and institutional performance after 2001 from the U.S. perspective, given the U.S.’s significant role as the most important donor and its vital role in Afghanistan. The U.S. Congress founded SIGAR in 2008 to audit, investigate, and evaluate U.S. reconstruction expenditures in Afghanistan. Unlike donor ministries that often have incentives to showcase progress, SIGAR’s mission tended to uncover waste, fraud, and mismanagement. Its audit reports provided clear and comprehensive documentation showing how aid distribution became integrated into patronage networks, which, in turn, increased elite incentives to avoid taking action and to prefer inaction in meaningful counterinsurgency. NATO/ISAF reports mainly evaluate the military operations of international forces, while UNAMA reports are more helpful for humanitarian issues concerns. However, these different viewpoints were valuable for triangulation.

Therefore, through this multi-layered approach, I combined official documents, independent audits, scholarly literature, and Afghan and international media to build a broad,

deep, and balanced evidence base. SIGAR reports provided in-depth insights via audits of aid distribution and U.S. spending policies in Afghanistan. Afghan media presented local viewpoints on elite discourse and ethnic issues in politics. Also, international sources enabled cross-verification, contextualisation and insights into the global perception of the Afghan conflict. The triangulation method not only enhances the study's credibility but also clearly backs its argument that political reluctance was not incidental but deliberately reinforced through the interaction of identity framing, executive centralisation, and foreign aid.

2.3.3 Data Organisation and Analysis

After screening the evidence, it was organised thematically to clarify how different mechanisms functioned. So, I organised all the data using a three-stage process. Firstly, I scanned each source individually to find out its relevance to the main argument of political reluctance or its relation to alternative explanations, such as incapacity, corruption, or Taliban resilience. This step made sure that material was not overlooked too quickly and that important evidence was collected. For example, Karzai and Ghani's presidential speeches, which called the Taliban bombers "brothers" or fellow Afghans, were deemed relevant to the argument of reluctance. Nevertheless, those U.S. and international reports pointing out weaknesses in Afghan logistics and air support were classified as evidence for capacity-based explanations.

The second stage involved grouping the evidence thematically. I was not only interested in predefined categories but also in the data itself, so the analysis was shaped by both the initial research aims and themes that emerged organically from the data. For example, national symbols such as the flag, currency, ceremonies, and the national anthem were seen as symbolic gestures that portrayed unity while concealing fundamental ethnic and factional hierarchies within political institutions, suggesting that even everyday actions may constitute an overall pattern of hesitation. This approach enabled the study not only to pursue its original claims but also to learn from the data itself.

The third phase of the analysis focused on categorising the evidence. Each extract was categorised as supportive, contradictory, or neutral with respect to the reluctance argument. For example, calling the Taliban "brothers" serves as supporting evidence, and presidential orders to release detainees further support it. Tacit tolerance reports between provincial governors and insurgents suggested possible collaboration, but, as they are inconclusive, they are considered "straw-in-the-wind" evidence. The Helmand offensives from 2009 to 2010 were seen as contradictory evidence because they included instances of Afghan forces deliberately engaging

in confrontation, as well as temporary gaps in state presence in some remote areas, without signs of insurgent influence, which were also treated as neutral evidence to prevent bias in source selection. Thus, this classification evidence follows Brady and Collier's (2010) principle, which highlights transparency and minimises bias (Brady & Collier, 2010).

2.4 Research Quality and Credibility

2.4.1 Reliability, Validity and Ethical Considerations

The study's commitment to reliability and validity was supported through intuitive approaches that promoted transparency and replicability in the research design. Besides of special care was taken to ensure linguistic accuracy when translating Dari and Pashto sources into English. I inspected each essential word and its meanings in English dictionaries to ensure accuracy, especially for politically sensitive terms. Validity was enriched by cross-verifying evidence among different categories. Accordingly, each claim must be supported by at least two independent sources. For example, the release of Taliban detainees was verified both through Afghan and international media coverage and through official documentation in SIGAR reports. I followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) principle of negative case analysis, rather than excluding it. This study employed contradictions as opportunities to challenge the argument rather than as anomalies to ignore. They also helped to avoid selective bias, thereby improving its credibility. These approaches proved to be reliable and valid in practice by documenting decisions, cross-validating evidence types, and transparently managing conflicts of material. Therefore, the research ensured that its findings are based on a transparent and trustworthy evidentiary foundation.

Furthermore, this study did not involve direct interaction with human participants, but ethical considerations remained important due to the sensitive nature of the material. Afghan media reports demonstrate that individuals possibly linked to insurgent activity were cited carefully to avoid exposing anyone to additional risk, and that a careful approach was taken to ethnic categories. Afghan nationalism was analysed as a constructed and politically instrumental identity. Also, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks were characterised by their internal diversity rather than as homogeneous groups. Data management adhered to established best practices. Materials were stored carefully, and references were thoughtfully documented to facilitate verification while ensuring safety remains a priority. The analysis benefited from insights of Afghan, U.S., NATO, and Taliban sources, while always being mindful of contrasts

in their availability and representation. The top endeavour throughout was to uphold scholarly integrity while responsibly handling politically and socially sensitive material. Therefore, so much effort was dedicated to cautiously citing all references, thoughtfully considering ethnicity, and maintaining transparent documentation to minimise harm, uphold ethical principles, and ensure that its findings rest on an ethically sound foundation.

2.4.2 Limitations and Researcher Positionality

Like all single case studies, this research has certain limitations. Due to security risks and restricted access, the study lacks interviews with Afghan elites or civil and military servants, who could have provided direct testimony. Fieldwork was not feasible due to security risks and Online interviews with individuals inside Afghanistan were also risky, as they could expose participants to danger because of Taliban surveillance of digital communications, especially those with the most intimate knowledge are at greatest risk, as they have worked with governments, including those of the U.S. and the UK, as well as the international community. Therefore, they are likely to have security concerns even in the context of online interviews. I was unable to travel to other countries to engage with the Afghan diaspora due to visa requirements and associated costs. Furthermore, conducting effective online interviews requires a foundation of trust, which is usually established through in-person interaction. Additionally, the Afghan diaspora in the UK mostly worked with the British military in Afghanistan rather than with the Afghan government, and some others did not hold senior decision-making roles within the Afghan state, so I was faced with a limited pool of relevant interviewees. To fill this gap, I drew instead on a wide-ranging documentary collection, including SIGAR interviews and extensive Afghan and international media archives, providing a form of archival testimony that indirectly reflects a range of voices.

Moreover, the study wraps up in August 2021, with Kabul's fall, and does not cover the period after the Taliban's takeover. However, this timeframe is deliberate because the preference is on explaining the collapse of the Republic, not on evaluating the subsequent regime. In addition, as Mahoney (2007) argues, single-case studies do not establish universal laws, but they do explain outcomes and offer influential insights into critical events. So, the results of this research may not be statistically generalisable; however, Afghanistan remains a pivotal case for theory development.

Also, reflexivity is essential to qualitative research, especially when the researcher is an insider, so, my locality as a scholar from Afghanistan has some advantages, notably linguistic

fluency and cultural understanding. For instance, recognising that in Persian usage, “Afghan” frequently refers to “Pashtun” was crucial for interpreting elite rhetoric and uncovering how seemingly inclusive calls to Afghan nationalism concealed ethnic underpinnings of exclusivity. These cultural nuances reveal the complexity and depth of the analysis that is unavailable primarily to an external researcher.

In addition, insider status carries risks and may create blind spots, while personal connections can lead to bias. To address these issues, I used diverse sources from Afghanistan, Western, and independent perspectives. I gathered evidence to test the main argument and monitor my assumptions, interpretations, and choices. These practices turned positionality from a weakness into a strength by protecting insider knowledge and enhancing transparency, credibility, and the integrity of the analysis. Finally, this thesis made limited use, AI Writing Assistant of Grammarly, 2024, Publisher: Grammarly Inc.; OpenAI, URLs: https://www.grammarly.com); solely for grammar correction, clarity and stylistic refinement. All ideas, arguments, and interpretations are entirely the author’s own, and all references were independently verified against their original sources.

2.5 Summary

This chapter demonstrated the research design, explained why process-tracing was chosen, and detailed the choice of Afghanistan as a single case study. It sought to clarify how evidence was identified, screened, organised, and analysed to address the central research question of how political reluctance, shaped by ethnonationalism, enabled by executive centralisation, and nurtured by foreign aid, prolonged Afghanistan’s conflict and contributed to its collapse in 2021. The chapter clarified why process-tracing, particularly in its explanatory-outcome mode, is the most suitable methodological approach for examining the causal mechanisms underlying the eventual downfall of the Republic.

Furthermore, selecting Afghanistan as a single, critical case is justified because it allows for a nuanced exploration of the interplay among state formation, identity politics, timeframe, and overwhelming external dependence. In addition, the chapter introduced the MMG historical lens to define the mechanisms underlying political reluctance from historical perspectives. The chapter detailed how reliability and validity were enhanced through reflexivity, data triangulation, and additional documentation. The chapter acknowledged the ethical considerations, research limitations, and the researcher’s positionality, confirming that

the inquiry remains methodologically rigorous, analytically sound, and reflexively self-aware. Therefore, this chapter establishes a foundation for the upcoming empirical analysis by drawing on established debates in qualitative inquiry and recognised standards of interpretive research.

The next chapter operationalises this framework, tracing how the mechanisms of political reluctance materialise in practice and cause conflict and state collapses across different political periods, as well as the recent structural reluctance within the Afghan state. Through situating the presidencies of Karzai and Ghani within the broader history of Afghan state-building, Chapter 3 shows how the MMG's lasting legacies continued to influence elite behaviour and policy decisions. The next chapter empirically illustrates how the merging of identity politics, executive dominance, and aid dependence established a pattern of selective engagement with the Taliban, prolonging the conflict and eventually steering Afghanistan towards collapse.

Chapter 3: Ethnonationalism and Political Reluctance

Afghanistan's collapse in 2021 cannot be explained solely by ethnic diversity; it stemmed from the paradox of Pashtun loyalty. Contrary to non-Pashtun groups such as the Hazaras, Tajiks, and Uzbeks, and marginalised Pashtun tribes who had minimal participation in the decision-making process but largely aligned the state, some certain Pashtun tribes produced both the presidents who governed and the Taliban, who led the insurgency. Ultimately, the state fell to a Pashtun-led insurgency that was tolerated and at times protected by Pashtun presidents Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, whose political reluctance to confront the Taliban decisively proved fatal to the Republic (A. Hakimi, 2013; Murtazashvili, 2022; SIGAR, 2021). Explaining this dichotomy is the central assignment of this chapter. The analysis builds upon the notions from Chapters 1 and 2, which introduced the concept of political reluctance and defined the study's historical framework, termed the Muhammadzai Model of Governance (MMG). This chapter uses that background to show that reluctance was historically embedded in the Afghan state structures, not just a sign of weak leadership. The investigation process-traces Karzai and Ghani's presidencies within the broader context of Afghan traditional state-building, demonstrating how enduring historical legacies of identity-based and institutional centralisation have contributed to recurring conflicts and state collapses in Afghanistan.

The MMG originated in the late nineteenth-century state-building project of Abd al-Raḥman Khan (r. 1880–1901), a Muhammadzai prince who forged the foundations of the modern Afghan state (Kakar, 1979; Noelle, 1998). His rule consisted of three interconnected components. First, ethnonationalism, which linked Afghan identity with Pashtun dominance (Barfield, 2010; Hyman, 2002), second, highly centralised governance, which consolidated coercive and administrative power in the ruler (Barfield, 2010; Rubin, 2002), and third, the rentier state and patronage, which distributed foreign resources (British Empire subsidies) through loyalty networks rather than inclusive institutions (Barfield, 2010; Rubin, 2002). Afghan nationalism, based on Afghanism and Islamism, served both as a state ideology and a claim to national interest, legitimising autocratic rule and supporting centralised authority (Hyman, 2002; Leake, 2023; Rubin, 2002). However, several successive regimes have undertaken reforms, including Amanullah Khan's modernist initiatives and Mahmud Tarzi's advocacy of constitutionalism, the 1964 Constitution, the communist regime, and democratic reforms after the 2001 Republic, but none of them dismantled the MMG. Instead, they

cautiously replicated and sustained it without replacing it (Gregorian, 1969; Leake, 2023; Ruttig, 2011; Saikal, 2004). For instance, the post-2001 U.S.-backed Republic produced the democratic version of the MMG, and the Taliban have revived an extreme authoritarian version of it, blending traditional Pashtun tribal dominance with an extremist Islamist justification for centralised coercion (Ruttig, 2010). In other words, the Republic was the softest version of MMG, and after Abd al-Raḥman Khan, the Taliban is one of MMG's best products.

Within the Republic, political reluctance was evident through three related mechanisms. At first, in fraternal discourse, which presidents often portrayed the Taliban fighters as fellow Afghans and brothers, presenting the conflict as an internal family matter rather than a threat to national security. Second, institutional design, which granted the presidency considerable power in the 2004 Constitution, allowed selective law enforcement and highly personalised governance. So, this enabled the presidents to manage their co-ethnic insurgency and distribute resources according to their narrow ethnic preferences, often with minimal institutional checks and balances. Third, foreign aid nurtured rent-seeking elites in the Republic and rewarded their inaction and avoidance strategies; meanwhile, the Taliban also benefited from the same aid resources. Together, this Muhammadzai-style political order created symbiotic economic ties, generating incentives and capacity on both sides, a political environment in which the continuation of conflict proved more beneficial than its resolution.

This chapter explores how the MMG influenced Afghanistan's ethnic and national politics in five sections and subsections. Section One details the country's ethnographic structures, diverse ethnic groups, census politics, and regional divisions that impact state legitimacy. Section Two discusses theories of ethnonationalism and Afghan nationalism. Section Three uses process-tracing to scrutinise the evolution of the MMG from 1747 to 2021, demonstrating how various rulers utilised nationalism to strengthen Pashtun influence and centralise power across different regimes, including monarchies, republics, communist states, Taliban rule, and the post-2001 Republic. Section Four examines ethnic politics during Karzai and Ghani's administrations, demonstrating how their ethnic kinship sympathising with the Taliban, enabled by centralised authority, and reliance on donor rents sustained hesitation and extended the insurgency. Section Five ends the chapter by linking ethnic nationalism and elite strategies to Afghanistan's repeated history of conflicts and state collapses.

3.1 Afghanistan's Ethnographic Structures

3.1.1 The Demographic Puzzle: Census Politics and Legitimacy

Afghanistan is not only ethnically diverse but also a country where state symbols and statistics have been persistently politicised in elite bargaining (Barfield, 2010; Gregorian, 1969; Rubin, 2002). The national symbols, such as the country's name, currency, anthem, flag, and demographic details on ethnicity, religion, and culture, all serve as instruments of power, so that their quality and quantity have often been challenged and renegotiated by elites to establish legitimacy, share power, and allocate resources. Under these politicised circumstances, the core unresolved issue is the demographic problem. Because previous regimes either ignored it or politicised the process, fearing that accurate data could threaten fragile power-sharing agreements, there has been no accurate, up-to-date national census to date (Emadi, 1990; Saikal, 2004). The lack of precise data has created a demographic puzzle. Pashtun elites, particularly the Muhammadzai rulers, often claim Pashtuns are the majority in the country, depicting Pashtun tribes as a unified ethnic group and the dominant demographic group, thereby claiming they are the natural rulers of the state. Other groups rarely asserted majority claims of their own; instead, they challenged Pashtun primacy by stressing the lack of transparent data and emphasising non-Pashtun exclusion (Barfield, 2010; Mousavi, 1998).

Estimates suggest that Pashtuns comprise approximately 38-42%, Tajiks about 27-33%, Hazaras 9-15%, Uzbeks 9-12%, and other groups, such as Aimaq, Turkmen, Baluch, and Nuristani, roughly 1-3% of the population (Barfield, 2010, 2022; Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), 2021) [Reliable ethnic data are scarce; figures are approximate and contested]. However, reliable data on ethnicity is limited and often politicised. As a result, these figures are sensitive, with Pashtun elites tending to manipulate numbers to support claims of majority status. Critics, however, dispute these figures and emphasise Afghanistan's diversity. Nonetheless, demographic data plays an important role in determining politics, impacting who holds power, resource distribution, and national concerns. The links of Afghan identity with Pashtuns further complicate these points, suggesting that the notion of a Pashtun majority is more a political claim than an actual demographic fact (Gregorian, 1969; Rubin, 2002). Comparative studies emphasise the importance of census politics in heterogeneous societies. The confessional practice in Lebanon relied on the controversial 1932 census; however, the failure to update the data led to sectarian inequalities and the civil war (Hudson, 1968; Makdisi, 2004). Some elites in Nigeria manipulated the census to justify their unequal

representation and resource allocation (Frankema & Jerven, 2014). Also, census politics intensified Sinhala-Tamil divisions in Sri Lanka (Tambiah, 1986). Hence, in Afghanistan, Pashtun elites, especially the Mohammadzai rulers, broadly propagated the myth of their majority status. However, other groups sought to challenge political exclusion rather than to achieve demographic dominance.

Overall, international intervention overlooked or failed to adequately address Afghanistan's long-standing demographic problems. They established Afghan political institutions without accurate census data. In fact, the formation of the Republic was more a result of elite negotiations than an accurate reflection of the country's actual demographic data (Goodhand & Hakimi, 2014; C. Johnson & Leslie, 2009). Billions of dollars in aid have been provided to Afghanistan; however, the absence of accurate census data fostered a rent-seeking environment rather than encouraging the development of effective political institutions. Afghan elites negotiated over the distribution of power, state positions, appointments, and resources by using mythical and misleading data that favoured their ethnic interests rather than mirroring reality. By accepting the notion of a Pashtun majority without a genuine census, international donors inadvertently reinforced a centralised presidential system controlled by Pashtun elites that relied on foreign support. This situation led to ethnic dominance, blocked development, and resulted in political stagnation (Rubin, 2002; SIGAR, 2016a, 2021).

3.1.2 Ethnic Geography and Regional Cleavages

Pashtun tribes form a robust, highly diverse tribal community. They mainly reside in the south and east, but extending across the Durand Line[20] into Pakistan, their communal identity is generally understood to rest on three interrelated features: patrilineal descent through tribal lineage, adherence to Sunni Islam of the Hanafi school, and observance of Pashtunwali, the customary code of honour regulating social conduct and reciprocity (Ahmed, 1980; Barfield, 2010; Glatzer, 1998). Tribal loyalty is fundamental to Pashtun identity, which is rooted in a segmentary lineage system that promotes solidarity against outsiders while preserving internal rivalries (Ahmed, 1980; Glatzer, 1998). The ongoing bloody dispute between the Durrani and Ghilzai tribes highlights internal divisions that have been instrumental in influencing Afghan

[20] The Durand Line was created in 1893 as a result of an agreement between Abd al-Raḥman Khan of Afghanistan and Sir Mortimer Durand of British India. Although it became the de facto international border after 1947, the Afghan governments have consistently refused to recognise it (Barfield, 2010; Rubin, 2002).

political conflicts and state collapse over the centuries (Barfield, 2022). In the late nineteenth century, Abd al-Raḥman Khan, of the Muhammadzai branch of the Durrani, backed his rule by privileging Durrani elites while embarking on punitive campaigns against Ghilzai communities in the east, including large-scale displacement that entrenched Durrani dominance (Barfield, 2010; Kakar, 1979). More than a century later, the Taliban have disproportionately emerged from the Ghilzai and other marginal Kandahari Pashtun tribes, turning long-standing grievances against Muhammadzai dominance into an insurgency movement. Their leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, was originally from the marginalised Hotak-Ghilzai tribe in Uruzgan. This background differs markedly from that of the privileged Kandahari Durrani elites (Farrell, 2018; Giustozzi, 2009; Rashid, 2010). The rise of the Taliban as a rival within the Pashtun ethnicity to the Durrani (Mohammadzai) dominance demonstrates how internal Pashtun conflicts have long hampered Afghan state-building efforts over the last two centuries (Abbas, 2014; Barfield, 2010; Giustozzi, 2009; Rashid, 2010).

Pashtuns primarily speak Pashto, although many urban Pashtuns also speak Dari (Persian). Historically, Pashtun elites have primarily used Dari in government, literature, and diplomacy. Ahmad Shah Durrani composed poetry in Persian (as well as Pashto), and the Durrani dynasty retained Persian as a principal medium of courtly, diplomatic, and historiographical culture under his successors. Later monarchs, including Amanullah Khan, Abd al-Raḥman Khan, Nadir Shah, and Zahir Shah, were more comfortable in Persian than Pashto, with Zahir Shah's mother tongue being Dari (Barfield, 2010; Gregorian, 1969; Noelle, 1998). Mahmud Tarzi, a notable Pashtun Muhammadzai modernist in the early twentieth century, primarily wrote in Persian. He was a firm supporter of reformist journalism and later endorsed efforts to promote Pashto. This pragmatic bilingualism reflected Afghanistan's cultural hybridity and highlighted the twentieth-century political endeavour to institutionalise Pashtun dominance by elevating Pashto to the status of national language (Ruttig, 2011). These dynamics lead to what can be called the paradox of dominance. Despite centuries of political supremacy, Pashtuns have never been unified. Tribal rivalries, regional differences, such as those between the Kandahari and eastern tribes, and internal factionalism have repeatedly undermined the Pashtun tribes' unity (Barfield, 2010; Rubin, 2002). However, Afghan nationalism emerged as an elite strategy to counter this fragmentation, but worsened exclusion by promoting Muhammadzai dominance and marginalising both non-Pashtun groups and numerous Pashtun tribes (Edwards, 2002; Gregorian, 1969).

Tajiks are considered the second-largest ethnic group. They are Persian-speaking Sunnis, mainly located in the northeast (Panjshir, Badakhshan), the north (Mazar-i-Sharif), the west (Herat), and in major urban centres such as Kabul (Saikal, 2004). Unlike Pashtuns, Tajiks are not organised into tribes. Their social organisation revolves around qawm, flexible networks of solidarity based on village, neighbourhood, or occupation (Roy, 1990; Schetter, 2003). Historically, Tajiks have been integral to Afghanistan's culture, education, and government. During the civil war, their military influence was most clearly demonstrated in the 1990s, when Ahmad Shah Massoud and the Northern Alliance mounted the most effective resistance against the Taliban (Rashid, 2010). However, during the Republic (2001-2021), Tajiks were prominent in the officer corps, intelligence services, and bureaucracy but were systematically excluded from state institutions under both Karzai and Ghani (Goodhand & Hakimi, 2014). Even though they were excluded from executive authority, Tajik community generally maintained allegiance to the Republic and bore a disproportionate share of the conflict while their leaders gained governmental positions inside of Afghan state. This supports a key argument of this chapter: division was not inherently caused by diversity but by exclusionary state mechanisms. Tajiks agreed to take subordinate roles within the structure of the Republic in exchange for alignment, unlike Pashtun-led factions, which frequently launched insurgencies.

Hazaras primarily reside in the central highlands and major cities (Barfield, 2010; Mousavi, 1998). They are largely Shia, with Sunni and Ismaili minorities, and speak Hazaragi, a dialect of Persian. From a historical perspective, Hazaras have suffered from the continued persecution by each successive Afghan regime, especially under Abd al-Raḥman Khan in the 1880s. His harsh campaign (many Hazara people claim it was Hazara's genocide) included mass killings, enslavement, and land confiscation of over half of their population (Gregorian, 1969; Mousavi, 1998). Pashtun nomads (Kuchis) settled on the homes and lands of Hazaras, displacing them and causing ongoing dispossession and grievances (Shahrani, 1986). Despite these historical facts, after 2001, Hazaras experienced a notable increase, thanks to greater access to education, increased political participation, and a vibrant civil society that promoted upward mobility and integration into state institutions (A. Hakimi, 2013). In fact, for the second time, after the Soviet-backed communist regime, Hazaras were more visible in education, society, and, to a limited extent, politics during the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. However, the Taliban insurgents and ISIS-K continued to attack them, especially on Shia religious sites and Hazara neighbourhoods, often with limited or delayed Republic protection (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Despite their support to the Republic, they continued to experience political

marginalisation and were excluded from major power-sharing arrangements (Ibrahimi, 2017; SIGAR, 2021). The experience of the Hazaras highlights that ethnic diversity in itself does not destabilise a country. Despite facing severe exclusion from state institutions, limited Pashtun-led state's protection and experiencing disproportionate violence from insurgents and sectarian groups, Hazaras community persisted in support the Republic and their leaders gained governmental positions. Their alignment, compared to Pashtun elites' reluctance to suppress their co-ethnic insurgents, indicates that the fall of the Republic was not caused by pluralism but by the politicisation of ethnonationalism and an intentional choice to avoid decisive confrontation (Barfield, 2010; Ibrahimi, 2017; Mousavi, 1998; SIGAR, 2021).

Uzbeks are concentrated in the northern provinces of Jowzjan, Faryab, and Sar-e Pul (Barfield, 2010; Shahrani, 1986). They are Turkic-speaking Sunnis who were historically marginalised in Afghan state politics. Uzbek political influence grew during Abdul Rashid Dostum's leadership, with militia networks emerging as a formidable force in the civil war and thereafter (Giustozzi, 2009). However, Uzbeks had a significant regional influence through patronage networks and local militias during the Republic, but they were often excluded from key national leadership positions. Their vulnerability became more apparent in 2021, when northern strongholds quickly fell to the Taliban, while the central government was indifferent to their defence. This reality supports perceptions of selective enforcement (SIGAR, 2021). However, despite their limited political participation in decision-making, Uzbek community predominantly support the Republic, and their leaders gained governmental positions. Their experience highlights the main point of this chapter: Afghanistan did not fall apart because of ethnic diversity, but due to politicised Pashtun ethnonationalism and the elite's reluctance to confront co-ethnic insurgents.

In addition to the above, Afghanistan is also home to various smaller ethnolinguistic groups; though fewer in number, they have made notable contributions to local politics and regional affairs. The Aimaq, making up about 4 per cent of the population, are Persian-speaking Sunni pastoralists mainly found in the west. The Turkmen, who make up about 3 per cent, live in the north and are traditionally known for their weaving and trade. The Baluch, who make up around 2 per cent of the population, inhabit the southern borderlands with Iran and Pakistan (Barfield, 2010). The Nuristanis, who live in the eastern mountains, were coerced into converting from polytheism to Islam during Abd al-Raḥman Khan's rule in the 1880s (Gregorian, 1969; Shahrani, 1986). Other groups, like the Pashai and Pamiris, live in isolated valleys and maintain distinctive linguistic and religious traditions and customs. However, these

minorities may not often affect national politics; they have been important in local community dynamics. Despite facing significant insurgent violence, many continued to show their alignment to the Republic (Goodhand & Hakimi, 2014). Their experience, like that of the Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks, shows that diversity alone did not cause instability.

In conclusion, as this section has discussed so far, Afghanistan is home to a variety of minority groups, and no single group makes up the majority. The ethnic and census claims made by nationalists functioned more as political constructs than as reflections of verified demographics. Historically, the Muhammadzai elites and subsequent regimes advanced these narratives to legitimise their dominance (Barfield, 2010; Rubin, 2002). Moreover, they imposed centralisation over accommodation, while the country's geography reinforces ethnic enclaves (Dupree, 1980; Giustozzi, 2009; Saikal, 2004). They positioned themselves as the bearers of the nation's burdens, demonstrating their primacy through mythological census, language, religion, and centralised authority. This legacy has persisted mainly in the Republic since 2001 (Barfield, 2010; Gregorian, 1969; Rubin, 2002). Nonetheless, Afghanistan's ethnographic mosaic shows that diversity itself did not cause the collapse. Hazaras, Tajiks, Uzbeks communities and marginalised Pashtun tribes mostly remained aligned to the Republic despite experiencing exclusion and repression and their elites and ethnic leaders (former Mujahedeen) co-opted into Afghan state, while the ongoing conflict mainly arose from Pashtun tribal rivalries. Therefore, this section suggests that instability resulted not from pluralism itself but from the politicisation of ethnography into certain Pashtun-centred (Afghan) nationalism, which has perpetuated ongoing conflict and caused recurring state collapses historically (Barfield, 2010, 2022; Rashid, 2010; Rubin, 2002).

3.2 Theoretical Foundations of Ethnonationalism

3.2.1 Ethnonationalism: Competing Identity Approaches

Discussions about ethnicity and nationalism are central to the social sciences because they explore a key question in politics: Are collective identities fixed and unchangeable, or influenced by historical events and strategically built? The importance of this discussion extends beyond academia. Understanding war and peace, as well as state-building and state collapse, depends on how we interpret identity. The leading identity theories are primordialism, modernist constructivism, and ethno-symbolism. They present different assumptions about the origins, persistence, and political importance of identity, and together they have greatly

influenced scholarly efforts to explain why some societies coexist peacefully with diversity, while others descend into tension and even violent conflict.

Clifford Geertz (1973) discusses that primordialism holds that ethnic and national ties are ultimately natural and intrinsic, with kinship, religion, language, and customs playing crucial roles in fostering strong emotional bonds and a shared history within communities. Equally, Anthony Smith (1989) and other early nationalist thinkers adopted this viewpoint, asserting that people's relationships are rooted in blood, heritage, and shared history, which illustrate these identities with emotional depth and social resilience. Later, in his 1998 view, he revised his perspective, adopting an ethno-symbolist stance, acknowledging that cultural myths and memories are enduring yet adaptable over time. Writers such as Robert Kaplan (1993) have used this perspective to describe what they term "ancient hatreds," especially in the Balkans; however, historians such as Noel Malcolm (1994) have criticised these basic interpretations. More broadly, critics often point out that primordialism perceives group boundaries as too rigid, overlooks how identities change over time, and tends to underappreciate the crucial roles that leaders and institutions play in mobilisation (Geertz, 1973; A. D. Smith, 1989; Kaplan, 1993; Malcolm, 1994). Afghanistan offers a setting where primordialist narratives have long resonated. Pashtun dominance was often depicted as natural, rooted in kinship and tribal solidarity (Barfield, 2010; Gregorian, 1969; Rubin, 2002). The Muhammadzai dynasty legitimised its authority through claims of tribal ancestry, while subsequent regimes redefined Pashtun identity as synonymous with Afghan nationhood, projecting its origins thousands of years into the past through mythologised historical narratives (Barfield, 2010; Gregorian, 1969; Kakar, 1979). These primordialist ideas also shaped how insurgency was perceived. Presidents depicted the Taliban fighters as members of a larger Pashtun brotherhood, and not as enemies but as Afghan brothers (Goodhand & Hakimi, 2014; Ruttig, 2011). These stories strengthened ethnic affinity and made it seem normal and native, rather than strategic, for political leaders to hesitate in confronting the Taliban.

Modernist-constructivist perspectives adopt a different view, emphasising the historical contingency of nationalism. This approach can explain identity adaptation in variations across time and space, showing how identities can be mobilised or reshaped in response to social and political change. Ernest Gellner (1983) contended that the construction of nationalism was crucial for sustaining industrial society, whereas Eric Hobsbawm (1990) described how elites develop traditions and nationalist ideas to legitimise their power. Benedict Anderson (2008) famously described nations as imagined communities, whereas Rogers Brubaker (2004)

cautioned against “groupism.” Kanchan Chandra (2006) described how elites strategically activate or mute identities in response to institutional incentives. Hence, this theory asserts that identity and nationalism are not natural consequences of kinship ties but instead a conscious effort of social engineering. However, critics caution that this approach often overstates the influence of elites and individuals and forgets the ongoing importance of ethnic loyalties and native identities, which continue to play a significant role (Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1990; Anderson, 2008; Brubaker, 2004; Chandra, 2006). In Afghanistan, elites fostered Afghan nationalism to establish dominance and legitimacy by harnessing collective wisdom and mobilising the public. So, Afghan elites employed national symbols, a flag, currency, anthem, ethnicity, and “Afghan” as a national identity, regardless of country diversity, through the Afghanisation/Pashtunisation project to civic nationalism, communist, Talibanist and finally brotherhood nationalism, all to portray a new unified Afghan identity as natural, native, and inherent. Successive rulers adopted Afghan nationalism as a civic ideal, disguising its ties to Pashtun identity in everyday political language. However, in practice, it continued to function as Pashtun domination and control. So, this boasting of Afghan nationalism as a national objective encouraged authorities to engage with the Taliban selectively due to ethnic solidarity. Ethnicity, therefore, was neither fixed nor purely symbolic. It was actively mobilised and embedded in state institutions. This deliberate identity construction shows that Afghan nationalism was not static but continuously shaped and influenced by institutional and political factors (Hyman, 2002; Barfield, 2022). Hence, in Afghanistan, a modernist-constructivist perspective helps to understand how elites mobilised ethnic identity to maintain power.

Finally, ethno-symbolism positions itself between timeless and modernist arguments by emphasising cultural characteristics that sustain nationalism, as Smith (1998) argues, nations are modern political constructs. Hence, their longevity relies on historical myths, symbols, and collective memories. These cultural components are not necessarily ancient but are repeatedly redefined to support current statehood goals (A. D. Smith, 1998). In Sri Lanka, as a case, Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism invoked historical and religious myths to marginalise Tamils, deepening the longstanding conflict (Tambiah, 1986). Whereas, in Switzerland and Canada, on the other hand, myths and symbols of pluralism were institutionalised through federalism and multiculturalism, supporting inclusive national identities (Lijphart, 1977; Kymlicka, 1995). Afghanistan obviously exemplifies the ethno-symbolist perspective. Nationalists aim to highlight Pashtun dominance by consistently depicting Ahmad Shah Durrani as the symbolic founding father and using Islamic authenticity to support their claims. They utilised myths of

Pashtun natural right to leadership and the sanctity of Islam to endow Afghan nationalism with significance and emotional resonance. This foundation inspired future regimes, including the Taliban (Barfield, 2022; Gregorian, 1969; Rubin, 2002; Saikal, 2004). Therefore, ethno-symbolism theory offers a comprehensive explanation for the enduring popularity of Afghan nationalism across successive regimes and how they often utilise it to connect the state's legitimacy to shared cultural memories and a strong sense of identity. However, critics caution that this approach may be too rigid, potentially leading to both inclusion and exclusion, and thus does not sufficiently explain why civic alternatives have persistently failed to build a civic society in Afghanistan (Brass, 1991; Hutchinson, 2005).

Therefore, each of the primordialist, modernist-constructivist, and ethno-symbolist perspectives reveals key aspects of Afghanistan's identity politics; however, none of them provides a full explanation on its own. Primordialism shows kinship and tribal solidarity, but it oversimplifies Afghan identities that were, in reality, politically reconstructed through state-building and coercion (Barfield, 2010; Gregorian, 1969). Modernist-constructivist shows how elites actively shape and redefine identity. However, critics argue that these approaches tend to exaggerate the influence of elites and underestimate the emotional strength of ethnic loyalties (Brubaker, 2004; Chandra, 2006).

Ethno-symbolism explains why Afghan nationalism remains strong and durable, emphasising myths of Pashtun supremacy and Islamic authenticity. However, it faces challenges in understanding why civic or pluralist movements often fail to establish themselves or achieve mobilisation (Brass, 1991; Hutchinson, 2005; A. D. Smith, 1998). What remains unclear is how these interactions contributed to the development of a Pashtun-focused nationalism that influenced elite behaviour across various regimes. This research addresses that gap by developing the MMG framework, which combines aspects of identity, power, and legitimacy. It demonstrates how ethno-national ideology, executive centralisation, and patronage-based governance combined to produce an ambivalence, in which the ruling elites of the Republic selectively engaged with the insurgency rather than confronting it decisively. In this way, it builds on existing debates by demonstrating that Afghan nationalism served both as a tool for mobilisation and as a mechanism of political reluctance.

3.2.2 Defining Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Ethnonationalism

To clarify the concept of ethnonationalism, it is necessary to distinguish between the two elements of ethnicity and nationalism. Ethnicity is fundamentally a socially constructed essence formed by shared myths about ancestry, language, religion, or cultural practices, rather than by biological traits, while the importance of these markers varies over time and across different contexts (Brubaker, 2004; Chandra, 2006; Jenkins, 1997). As a result, ethnic groups are communities characterised by shared recognition, where both members and outsiders define boundaries through everyday practices, symbols, and stories (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007; Jenkins, 1997). In Afghanistan, groups such as the Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks, despite coexisting for many years, show that language, sectarian ties, and common history help maintain their unique identities rather than social divisions (Barfield, 2022; Mousavi, 1998). Nonetheless, nationalism is a modern political movement that primarily emerged in the nineteenth century, arguing that populations considered as nations have a right to sovereignty within specific territorial borders (Anderson, 2008; Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm & Kertzer, 1992). Nationalists promote myths of shared ancestry, common history, or cultural traditions to link identity to political legitimacy (A. D. Smith, 1991; Calhoun, 1997). In Afghanistan, nationalist efforts that emphasised sovereignty often favoured ethnic dominance as the basis of the state and the key element of Afghan identity (Barfield, 2022; Rubin, 2002).

This study mainly differentiates between civic and ethnonationalism (Kohn, 2005). Civic nationalism fosters shared political values, a sense of citizenship, and law-based institutions. Typically, it promotes diversity, whereas, as previously mentioned, ethnonationalism ties identity to factors such as ancestry, language, or religion, often favouring insiders while excluding outsiders (A. D. Smith, 1991; Eriksen, 1991). Also, only a few forms of nationalism are entirely civic or ethnic. So, understanding the distinction between civic and ethnic nationalisms helps to clarify Afghanistan's situation, where civic ideals were often voiced but never questioned the Pashtun dominance (Rubin, 2002; Ruttig, 2011). Cases such as Zionism, Irish nationalism, and Tamil nationalism illustrate how ethnonationalism can generate strong internal cohesion while also producing exclusionary boundaries (Beatty, 2017; Gans, 2008; Krishna, 1999). In Afghanistan, this tension first manifested under Abd al-Raḥman Khan, who promoted "Afghanisation" by establishing Pashtun dominance in the statehood through coercive measures and institutionalised exclusion, including violent campaigns against other ethnic groups and marginalising Pashtun tribes (Barfield, 2010; Kakar, 1979). However, reformers like Mahmud Tarzi pushed a civic modernisation agenda based on constitutionalism,

journalistic reforms, and Pan-Islamic revival (Ruttig, 2011). In practice, it foreshadowed the emergence of Afghan nationalism under the guise of civic aspirations. It is because such reforms operated within a political framework dominated by Pashtun power, primarily centred around the Muhammadzai dynasty's efforts to consolidate monarchical authority from the late nineteenth century onward (Barfield, 2010; Gregorian, 1969). This oscillation between ethnic dominance and civic aspiration exemplifies what this study calls "Pashtun ethnonationalism", expressed through the rhetoric of Afghan nationalism (see Chapter 1).

Finally, the critical distinction lies between diversity and ethnonationalism. Diversity by itself is not necessarily the cause of instability in heterogeneous societies; instead, it can help foster both stable multicultural democracies and prevent violent civil conflicts (Horowitz, 2000; Lijphart, 1977). Similarly, historical evidence demonstrates that diverse ethnic groups in Afghanistan coexisted peacefully for many eras and acted as a united nation with minimal state support. Therefore, the instability was not due to diversity itself but resulted from the politicisation of Pashtun ethnonationalism (Afghan nationalism), which became institutionalised through state structures and was further worsened by foreign aid (Goodhand & Hakimi, 2014; Rubin, 2002; SIGAR, 2016a). In reality, the regimes did not develop principles of civic nationalism. Instead, they emphasised division over unity, using ethnicity to mobilise and maintain power. As mentioned in Chapter 1, Hazaras, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and many marginalised Pashtun tribes remained broadly aligned to the Republic despite being systematically excluded. This suggests that ethnic diversity was not the reason for its collapse. Instead, it was the politicisation of identity that created the conditions for both constant conflict, insurgency and political reluctance, as well as for state collapse.

3.2.3 Afghan Nationalism: Afghanism and Islamism

Afghan nationalism has traditionally been understood through several overlapping viewpoints, such as the modernisation efforts of the monarchy (Gregorian, 1969; Poullada, 1970), Pashtun ethnonationalism (Barfield, 2010; Rubin, 2002), religious legitimation (Edwards, 2002; Noelle, 1998), and external support (Goodhand & Hakimi, 2014). While each emphasises one of the vital dynamics, the literature often treats them in isolation. Theoretically, the Primordialist view of Afghan identity is rooted in tribal kinship and Pashtun traditions. In contrast, modernist views associate identity with state-building efforts and rentier economies. Constructivists emphasise how elites manipulate ethnic identities and religious affiliations for political purposes. Ethno-symbolists demonstrate this through myths such as the claim that

Afghan civilisation dates back 5,000 years, that Ahmad Shah Durrani was the founder of modern Afghanistan, and that Pashto is the mother of languages, which helps build Afghan nationalism by linking it to a legendary ancient past. However, none of these philosophies alone can fully explain how Afghan nationalism functioned in reality and its outcomes.

This section presents a fresh, revisionist perspective. Afghan nationalism is not a timeless or natural and civic concept, but rather a state-sponsored project to fuse Afghanism and Islamism in favour of Muhammadzai's monarchs and elites. These two pillars were deliberately and consciously combined, constructed, and institutionalised by the Muhammadzai dynasty through the MMG from 1826 to 1973. The Muhammadzai elites advanced this fusion as the ideological foundation of the state and as a manifestation of the national interest of their monarchy (Barfield, 2010; Gregorian, 1969; Misdaq, 2006; Noelle, 1998; Rubin, 2002). In this context, Afghanism supplied the idiom of state nationalism by equating "Afghan" with the Pashtun—Muhammadzai identity. Meanwhile, Islamism also furnished religious legitimacy by portraying the rulers as custodians of Sunni orthodoxy. The Muhammadzai dynasty served as a vehicle for fusing these two pillars into a coherent, albeit exclusionary, political order and organic political culture. This institutional configuration, domestically, naturalised Pashtun (Muhammadzai) primacy, legitimised their domination, portrayed the Kandahari Muhammadzai elites as the legitimate rulers over all Pashtun tribes, and externally presented them to foreign sponsors, especially the British Empire, as princely representatives of all Pashtun tribes. In doing so, the dynasty successfully gained external recognition and subsidies that supported their authority and strengthened the centralised hierarchy of the Afghan state and monopolised control over Pashtun tribes and clans for 147 years (Barfield, 2010; Edwards, 2002; Gregorian, 1969; Rubin, 2002).

It is important to acknowledge that the Pashtuns were never a unified national entity, but rather a group of diverse tribes and lineages divided by geography, tribal loyalties, and kinship rivalries (Barfield, 2010; Noelle, 1998; Rubin, 2002). Pashtuns have numerous tribes and clans with diverse customs, values, and political traditions. Pashtun tribes are more closely bound by tribal loyalty and kinship networks than by any overarching collective identity (Ahmed, 1980; Barfield, 2010). The country's rugged geography and the Pashtuns segmented tribal structures hindered the emergence of a stable, pan-Pashtun identity (Barfield, 2010; Rubin, 2002). Pashtuns are divided into tribal confederations, notably the Durrani and Ghilzai, as well as dynastic lineages such as the Popalzai and Barakzai (Muhammadzai is one of its sub-lineages), alongside eastern tribes including the Afridi, Shinwari, and Mohmand, each asserting distinct

claims over power, legitimacy, and foreign subsidies (Ahmed, 1980). Historically, ongoing conflicts have frequently arisen between Durrani elites of Kandahar and Ghilzai tribes over political control and access to foreign support. At the same time, eastern Pashtun groups resisted taxes and conscription imposed by the central government. Hence, Pashtun tribal, lineage, and regional clashes have consistently weakened Pashtun-led central authority, leading to cycles of conflict and repeated state collapses among co-ethnic adversaries.

To overcome internal fissures and unify Pashtun tribes under a single framework, the Muhammadzai rulers rebranded Afghan identity as synonymous with Pashtunhood (Marine Corps Intelligence Activity (MCIA), 2002). This Afghanism tended to transform fragmented tribal affiliations into a collective ethnic identity, elevating Pashtunhood to the status of national identity. In practice, however, the Muhammadzai clan itself monopolised state institutions, rent-seeking behaviour rewarded the compliant tribes through foreign subsidies, while sidelining or coercing those deemed disloyal (Barfield, 2022). In doing so, the Muhammadzai dynasty positioned itself as the natural representative of Pashtun interests, fusing Afghanism with Islamism to divinely legitimise its authority and later extending this claim to territorial ambitions such as a Greater Pashtunistan (Edwards, 2002; Gregorian, 1969; Saikal, 2004). Afghanism was sponsored as a state nationalism project that prioritised Pashtuns (Muhammadzai) as the genuine core of the nation, while marginalising other martialised Pashtun groups and over time other ethnic groups. This view was expressed through language reforms and the invention of historical narratives that portrayed Pashtuns as the legitimate rulers of Afghanistan (Gregorian, 1969; Ruttig, 2011). Islamism portrayed the Muhammadzai rulers as the genuine guardians of Sunni Islam. Islamist narratives granted them a divine legitimacy, reinforced through strategic alliances with clerical elites. This approach emphasised Sunni orthodoxy as the proper ideal, marginalising Shia Hazaras, Ismailis, and other religious minorities from the national identity (Edwards, 2002; Mousavi, 1998; Roy, 1990). Muhammadzai's elites executed their strategy through the MMG, which cultivated these idioms into a durable political order based on ethnic dominance, dynastic centralisation, and reliance on rentier income from the British Indian Empire, the Soviet Union, or, later, the United States (Barfield, 2010; Hyman, 2002; SIGAR, 2021).

Myth and symbols have consistently naturalised Afghan nationalism throughout different regimes. The myth of "Afghanistan as the graveyard of empires" projected unity against outsiders, while portraying Pashtuns as the authentic defenders and resistance, thus justifying their dominance (Barfield, 2010; Noelle, 1998). State historiography portrayed Ahmad Shah

Durrani as the symbolic founder of the nation, showing Muhammadzai rulers as his rightful heirs (Barfield, 2022; Gregorian, 1969). Mythological Pashto as the mother of all languages and promoting it as the national language, despite Dari's practical dominance, closely linked Afghan identity to Pashtun dominance (Ruttig, 2011). Ancient myths, such as the claim that Afghan civilisation is 5,000 years old, served as ethno-symbolic markers that rooted nationalism in a notion of eternal antiquity (Edwards, 2002; Saikal, 2004). Territorial claims linked to greater Pashtunisation became a vehicle for political mobilisation, enabling Pashtun rulers to present themselves as guardians of Pashtun communities on both sides of the Durand Line and across Afghanistan's wider frontier (Ahmed, 1980; Barfield, 2010; Gregorian, 1969; Hopkins, 2008). Likewise, state rituals, such as Independence Day parades, royal portraits on currency, and national flags and anthems, as well as the country's name, also served as civic symbols of Afghan unity, despite power remaining concentrated in a few hands.

However, the consequences were paradoxical; Afghan nationalism temporarily fostered solidarity, especially against non-Pashtun groups, but it has never resolved intra-Pashtun rivalries, which have persisted as recurring conflicts and state collapses over power and resources for more than two and a half centuries (Barfield, 2010; Edwards, 2002; Rubin, 2002). The rhetoric of inclusivity of Afghan nationalism concealed the narrow legitimacy base, systematically excluding non-Pashtun communities and sidelining dissenting Pashtun tribes alike. To maintain this order and suppress dissidents' dissatisfaction, Pashtun elites often externalise blame for conflict, attributing instability to British India, the Soviet Union, Pakistan, or the United States, while diverting attention from exclusionary governance and the root causes of domestic rivalries (Goodhand & Hakimi, 2014; Rubin, 2002). In fact, the exclusionary hierarchy created by the MMG framework utilised Afghan nationalism, along with its pillars of Afghanism and Islamism, under the guise of symbolic markers of Pashtun unity to control and govern over Pashtun tribes by a few Muhammadzai rulers. This practice constrained political authority through successive layers of ethnicity and religious identity, progressing from regional solidarities to tribal and clan affiliations. Eventually, decision-making became monopolised by a small circle of Kandahari/Muhammadzai elites (Barfield, 2022). As a result, Afghan nationalism not only excludes non-Pashtun communities but also leaves behind the Pashtun populations as a whole and narrows power and wealth in a small circle of Pashtun aristocratic Kandahari elites with limited accountability.

In the end, Afghan nationalism has demonstrated exceptional resilience and continuity throughout Afghanistan's modern history, despite a series of regime changes. Throughout the

history from the Muhammadzai dynasty to the communist era, the Mujahideen, the Taliban, and the Republic, Afghan nationalism has always been a key source of political legitimacy. However, successive regimes redefined nationalism to suit their goals without fundamentally changing its core meaning. Instead, they adopted their ideological rhetoric to fit current conditions, while maintaining the core principles of the MMG and its state ideology: a mix of Pashtun dominance, centralised authority, and moral appeals to Islamic or national unity. The following section traces the history of the MMG starting from 1747, details the development of Afghan nationalism over the years, and ends with the fall of the Republic in 2021.

3.3 Historical Evolution of MMG: Afghan Nationalism (1747–2021)

Afghan nationalism was not civic in nature but originated with the MMG to disguise exclusivity instead of inclusivity. The Muhammadzai dynasty crafted and developed Afghan nationalism as a state-sponsored project aimed at unifying fragmented Pashtun tribes, consolidating the power of the Muhammadzai elites within the central state, and subjugating rival Pashtun tribes. Its ideological packaging depended on Afghanism (a civic-modernist rhetoric of unity) and Islamism (a religious framework of legitimacy), both used to sacralise Pashtun Muhammadzai primacy under the guise of national cohesion over all other Pashtun tribes and non-Pashtun communities (Edwards, 2002; Gregorian, 1969).

Furthermore, the term “Afghan” specifically referred to Pashtuns; it was only in the twentieth century that the state started to promote it as a civic identity meant to encompass all communities (Barfield, 2010; Dupree, 1980; Gregorian, 1969). From the eighteenth century to the twenty-first, rulers from Ahmad Shah Durrani to the Taliban invoked different idioms of nationhood to legitimise power. These labels shifted from tribal confederation, Afghanisation, Afghanism, ethno-communist nationalism, jihadist nationalism, Talibanist nationalism, and finally “brotherhood nationalism” under the Republic. Nonetheless, the central concept remained intact; Afghan nationalism within the MMG’s state project mainly served as an instrument of ethno-dominance, centralisation, and political control rather than promoting unity or civic engagement. This approach led to adverse effects, including continued conflict and repeated state collapses (Edwards, 2002; Rubin, 2002; Ruttig, 2011). The following section traces the history of the MMG starting from Proto-Nationalism in 1747, details the development of Afghan nationalism over time, and ends with the fall of the Republic in 2021.

3.3.1 Pashtun Confederation and Proto-Nationalism (1747–1880)

Afghanistan's modern history demonstrates that the country was established in 1747, when Ahmad Shah Durrani declared himself king in Kandahar following the death of Nader Shah Afshar, the Shah of Persia[21] (r. 1736-1747). Ahmad Shah Durrani belonged to the Abdali tribe, specifically the Sadozai branch of the Popalzai clan of the Pashtuns in Kandahar. As a result, he gained both legitimacy and solid backing from Pashtun tribal leaders through his tribal connections and heritage. Thereafter, Afghan nationalist historians portrayed Ahmad Shah as the father of the nation, the founder of Afghan statehood, and as a symbol of a unified Afghan nation in 1747. However, his initial achievements were pretty modest, as noted by Barfield (2010), Gregorian (1969), and Noelle (1998). In practice, his kingdom rested on a loose confederation of Pashtun tribes and clans, mainly through Islamic legitimacy and opportunistic external patronage in Khorasan rather than on the establishment of an independent and modern nation-state (Barfield, 2010; Gregorian, 1969; Noelle, 1998).

Confederation, not a nation: Ahmad Shah's kingdom relied on balanced tribal loyalties and a centralised authority, with changing alliances within the Durrani confederation that strengthened his position. Ahmad Shah's kingdom lacked the bureaucratic complexity, territorial unity, or civic identity that characterise modern nation-states; however, he successfully governed a fragile tribal unity by appealing to Sunni Islamic legitimacy, securing clerical recognition, and portraying himself as a defender of Islam against external enemies (Barfield, 2010; Edwards, 2002). Also, loyalty was rewarded with land grants, titles, and war spoils, mainly funded by campaigns in India and Persia rather than by domestic taxation (Gregorian, 1969; Noelle, 1998). However, in the eighteenth century, Afghan remained essentially synonymous with Pashtun, not a civic label encompassing all communities (Noelle, 1998). Recent chronicles often place Ahmad Shah's realm within the broader region of Khorasan rather than a defined nation called Afghanistan (Gregorian, 1969; Noelle, 1998). Only in the twentieth century did Mohammadzai elites retroactively recast him as the symbolic progenitor of a timeless Afghan nation.

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[21] During Nader Shah Afshar's reign, the ruler of Persia (1736-1747), the areas that now constitute Afghanistan were part of the Persian Empire; however, during the colonial rivalry between the British Indian Empire and the Tsar of Russia in the nineteenth century, a designated country named "Afghanistan" emerged as a de facto region between the two colonial empires (Barfield, 2010; Gregorian, 1969; Noelle, 1998).

However, the outcome of the confederation kingdom was paradoxical. Measures to unify the Pashtuns often intensified tribal quarrels. Rivalry within the Durrani confederation, such as that between the Barakzai and Sadozai tribes, challenged the confederation's loose tribal organisation. Also, the Ghilzai and eastern tribes frequently opposed the authority of Ahmad Shah Durrani. These rivalries have caused recurrent divisions throughout Afghan history among Pashtun tribes, provoking insurgency and conflict, which, much later, created the Taliban's movement, which drew disproportionately on Ghilzai and marginal Kandahari networks (Abbas, 2014; Edwards, 2002; Giustozzi, 2009). Ahmad Shah's military campaign from Mashhad to Delhi earned him wealth and prestige; however, his control over Afghanistan's rugged terrain was limited and fragile, and local strongmen retained autonomy. It lacked a strong civic identity, a well-organised professional bureaucracy, and inclusive institutions. After he died in 1772, the confederation soon fell apart, revealing the absence of strong institutions essential for nation-building (Barfield, 2010; Noelle, 1998; Rubin, 2002). Finally, Ahmad Shah's legacy did not lead to the formation of a nation but instead became a treasured memory that was later mythologised as the symbolic origin of Afghanistan's statehood. Looking back, Ahmad Shah's legacy was essentially proto-nationalist; it was an initiative by the Muhammadzai elite to unify various Pashtun tribes under their single leadership. His mausoleum in Kandahar has materialised as a symbol of early Afghan nationalism, with leaders from Abd al-Rahman Khan to Karzai claiming they are his legitimate successors. They have repeatedly invoked his memory to amplify their tribal and ethnic legitimacy (Barfield, 2010; Noelle, 1998). These symbolic references not only honoured history but also reinforced the link between Afghan and Pashtun identities, providing a rhetorical base for the political reluctance in the Republic (see Chapter 1).

The following section explains that Abd al-Rahman Khan transformed this fragile legacy into a coercive state project through his Afghanisation effort, characterised by Pashtunisation, centralisation, militarised expansion, and foreign subsidies. He turned the proto-national confederation into an exclusionary state, emphasising Pashtun dominance in Afghan identity. Abd al-Rahman Khan's coercive measures, such as issuing fatwas, leading military campaigns, enforcing resettlements, renaming locations, and making symbolic appeals to Ahmad Shah, are suitable for historical process-tracing. They illustrate how Afghan nationalism was institutionalised, in line with the process-tracing framework described in Chapter 2.

3.3.2 MMG's State-Building and Afghanisation (1880–1901)

In 1880, the accession of Abd al-Rahman Khan, a Muhammadzai prince from the Barakzai dynasty, a branch of the Durrani confederation, marked a vital milestone in the development of modern state-building in Afghanistan. Installed with British recognition following the Second Anglo-Afghan War and sustained by annual subsidies from British India, he abandoned Ahmad Shah Durrani's lose model of tribal confederation in favour of a centralised and disciplinarian monarchy (Barfield, 2010; Gregorian, 1969; Rubin, 2002). Abd al-Rahman Khan ruled over the Pashtun tribes and non-Pashtun communities through aggressive coercion for more than twenty years. He developed a strong army, bought modern weapons, constructed forts and roads, and rewarded loyalists without relying on domestic taxes, with British support. Rubin (2002) described this strategy as a "rentier monarchy." Also, the 1893 Durand Line agreement further reinforced his external border, allowing him to concentrate his coercive power inward (Hopkins, 2008; Noelle, 1998).

Abd al-Rahman Khan's state-building approach, known as "Afghanisation" or "Pashtunisation," strengthened authority through three linked strategies: shaping identity, centralising power, and gaining foreign backing. The identity politics merged Pashtun ethnonationalism with Islamic legitimacy to defend the Afghanisation and Pashtunisation initiatives. The Muhammadzai elites and other dedicated tribes were rewarded for their loyalty by being integrated into state positions, while Kandahari/Durrani elites received preferential treatment within renter-based networks. Meanwhile, he promoted Pashto, although Dari remained dominant in administration roles. He relocated dissenting Pashtun tribes to the north, thereby distancing them from the centre and reducing non-Pashtun influence in their regions. (Barfield, 2010; Emadi, 1990; Gregorian, 1969; Rubin, 2002). Islamism legitimised this state's identity project, so that Sunni clerics issued fatwas to justify coercion, such as the forced Islamisation of Kafiristan (renamed Nuristan), which symbolically expanded the boundaries of Islam (Barfield, 2010; Dupree, 1980).

Abd al-Rahman Khan campaigned militarily against the Shia Hazara people, which involved massacres, enslavement, and land redistribution to Pashtun Kuchi nomads, between 1891 and 1893. These aggressive measures laid the groundwork for ongoing religious-based ethnic exclusion for future generations (Barfield, 2010; Emadi, 1990; Mousavi, 1998). He also extremely centralised his authority, holding control from Kabul with British support. He founded a strong army, modernised its weaponry, and reduced provincial autonomy. His

control methods included hostage-taking, forced resettlement, collective punishment, and increased fiscal oversight. Foreign support enabled the regime to bypass domestic taxation and shield itself from accountability, facilitating coercive action measures and maintaining rent-seeking loyalist networks. This dependence on external resources indicated a shift towards reliance on foreign aid rather than on domestic legitimacy as a legacy for successive regimes (Barfield, 2022; Noelle, 1998; Rubin, 2002; Shahrani, 1986).

Together, these mechanisms made the MMG the core of Afghan governance for the subsequent eras. Afghan identity was defined by ethnonationalism and Islamic legitimacy, executed through coercive centralisation, and supported by foreign support. This model was inherited and repurposed by successive regimes, including monarchical, republican, socialist, Taliban, and democratic ones; however, none of them dismantled the framework. Afghan nationalism was thus institutionalised not as a civic project but as a coercive instrument of the Muhammadzai elite's dominance, laying the historical foundations for the Republic's prolonged conflict with the Taliban in the form of symbiotic economic ties. The following section discusses how these coercive efforts to cultivate an Afghan identity, in the form of Afghan nationalism, were transformed into Afghan civic identity initiatives and strengthened under the successive Muhammadzai monarchies.

3.3.3 Afghanism and Civic Identity (1901–1929)

This section investigates the initial efforts to promote a civic Afghan identity. It traces the transition of Afghan nationalism from coercive measures to civic-driven reforms during Habibullah Khan's cautious steps from 1901 to 1919, to King Amanullah Khan's more daring yet brief modernisation ambitions from 1919 to 1929. They both elevated their state-sponsored Afghan nationalism to a civic initiative focused on constitutionalism, education, and citizenship; however, these efforts continued to serve the interests of the dynasty. Finally, the section also explains why it eventually fell apart, primarily due to ongoing Pashtun (Muhammadzai) dominance, tribal loyalties, taxation, clerical opposition, and unreliable external backing (Barfield, 2010; Gregorian, 1969; Kakar, 1979; Rubin, 2002).

Habibullah Khan took power after his father, Abd al-Rahman, died in 1901. Habibullah adopted a more cautious strategy than his father's coercive centralisation, partly because of a decline in British Indian subsidies. He avoided widespread repression and allowed some room for reformist discussion (Barfield, 2010; Gregorian, 1969; Kakar, 1979). In this more open environment, Mahmud Tarzi (a member of the Mohammadzai clan), a former exile influenced

by Ottoman Tanzimat reforms and Pan-Islamic ideas, expressed a new vision of Afghan national identity. He advocated his ideas through his journal, “Seraj al-Akhbar” (Lamp of the News). Tarzi boosted the concept of Afghanism to a civic identity rooted in constitutionalism, education, and active participation, rather than tribal ties (Poullada, 1970; Ruttig, 2011). This Afghan elite’s efforts demonstrated both the constructivist idea that elites can influence identity via discourse and the modernist perspective that nationalism develops through constitutional and bureaucratic reforms. So, in this era, “Afghan” was introduced not only as a synonym for Pashtun but also as the civic foundation of modern state-building.

Tarzi was inspired by the reformist movements of Ottoman constitutionalism, Japan’s nation-building efforts, and the Arabic press in the early twentieth century. He believed in scientific development and secular education, emphasising Afghanism as active citizenship rather than tribal ties. He argued that Islam could peacefully coexist with modern governance (Gregorian, 1969; Ruttig, 2011; Saikal, 2004). Nevertheless, Afghan nationalism was still constrained by the influence of the MMG, deep-rooted tribal loyalties, and religious authority. The monarchy appointed Pashtun (Muhammadzai) elites to government positions in Kabul, while Persian-speaking Tajiks engaged selectively with reformist ideas, whereas Hazaras and Uzbeks largely remained excluded (Mousavi, 1998). Moreover, unlike his father, Habibullah lacked secure foreign patronage to support reform. British subsidies that backed Abd al-Rahman Khan’s rentier monarchy were made conditional and politically restricted (Rubin, 2002). Without reliable external subsidies, Afghan nationalism depended more on persuasion than coercion. Hence, this heavy dependence on external support made his civic initiatives fragile and highly reliant on tribal goodwill (Barfield, 2010; Gregorian, 1969; Rubin, 2002).

Tarzi’s civic ideas were most ambitiously implemented during the reign of Amanullah Khan (1919-1929). After Habibullah’s assassination, his son Amanullah seized power, declared complete independence from Britain in 1919, and promulgated the 1923 Constitution, establishing a constitutional monarchy based on the principles of the MMG (Dupree, 1980; Gregorian, 1969; Shahrani, 1986). He promoted secular education, enacted legal reforms, and granted limited rights to women (Emadi, 1990; Poullada, 1970). Civic symbols such as national anthems, currency reforms, and a formalised administrative system were highlighted as signs of a nation founded on citizenship instead of tribal connections (Barfield, 2010). Nevertheless, Amanullah’s state-building lacked external subsidies. While Abd al-Rahman implemented policies of Afghanisation and centralisation using British financial support, Amanullah endeavoured to introduce civic reforms without comparable financial safeguards. Afghan

nationalism aimed to modernise civic identity without relying on foreign support; however, unstable domestic taxation led to increased resistance among tribes and attracted opposition from clerics. Subsequently, resistance rapidly overturned Amanullah's reforms. Pashtun tribal leaders opposed taxation and pushed back government interference; clerics labelled the reforms as un-Islamic, and non-Pashtun groups were suspicious of the civic rhetoric that constantly associated 'Afghan' identity with Pashtun hegemony. By 1929, widespread uprisings, mainly led by disgruntled Pashtun tribes, forced Amanullah to resign and flee to Italy rather than confront his co-ethnic insurgency.

The brief ascent of Habibullah Kalakani, a Tajik rebel who seized Kabul in 1929 with unexpected support from Pashtun tribes, represented a notable transformation in Afghan political history. It was the first time since the eighteenth century that a non-Pashtun held the throne, even if only temporarily. Pashtun elites found Kalakani's nine-month rule humiliating and unacceptable, as it challenged their longstanding dominance over the monarchy. Within months, the same Pashtun tribes that had supported Kalakani turned back to Nadir Khan, a Muhammadzai general who retook Kabul, captured Kalakani, and had him executed (Barfield, 2010; Gregorian, 1969; Ruttig, 2011). The restoration of the monarchy reaffirmed Pashtun (Muhammadzai) dominance as the indispensable basis of Afghan statehood. On one hand, the shifting support of Pashtun tribes for Amanullah, Kalakani, and Nadir Khan underscores a primordial perspective that emphasises the timeless nature of ethnic characteristics. On the other hand, it also shows both the fragility of civic Afghanism and the resilience of MMG frameworks: even when a civic order briefly emerged, it was violently reversed.

The civic experiment from 1901 to 1929 was an important yet unsuccessful effort to foster civic nationalism. Its failure revealed not only the destructive nature of the MMG in promoting civic nationalism through the significant impact of Muhammadzai ethnonationalism, tribal loyalties, and clerical authority, but also that, without foreign support, Afghan rulers could not impose or maintain reform. However, these failed attempts at civic movements left behind symbolic legacies, including independence in 1919, a written constitution, and civic traditions and rhetoric. These have become key references for later regimes, used either as sources of inspiration or warnings (Barfield, 2010; Rubin, 2002; Saikal, 2004). Most importantly for this study, Afghanism and Islamism expose the paradox at the heart of Afghan nationalism: civic aspiration has been repeatedly held hostage to Pashtun primacy, political centralisation, and dependence on external rents, the core mechanisms of the MMG. It foreshadowed later dynamics of political reluctance, in which leaders avoided

coercing their co-ethnic insurgents in the name of Afghan unity and of Islam, even as other ethnic groups offered a conditional alignment. In short, the civic Afghanism experiment of 1901-1929 revealed both the possibilities and limits of civic nationalism. However, it offered a brief glimpse of constitutional nationalism; its failure revealed that civic reform alone cannot escape the MMG's gravitational pull. As a result, these three aspects continued to influence the development and contradictions of Afghan nationalism across the twentieth century.

3.3.4 Monarchy and Ethno-Civic Nationalism (1929–1978)

Habibullah Kalakani, a Tajik, governed for only nine months; however, he significantly changed how the Muhammadzai elites understood legitimacy. They generally viewed Kalakani's rise as disgraceful, illegitimate, and a violation of the traditional Pashtun kingship supremacy. They realised that not only were the Pashtun tribes a potential threat to their authority, but that non-Pashtuns, such as Tajiks, also posed a danger to them. When Nadir Shah, a Muhammadzai general, seized power later that year, he restored the monarchy and reaffirmed the elite's determination to stop the same disruptions (Barfield, 2010). Under Nadir Shah and his successor, Zahir Shah, Afghan nationalism was strengthened and made an official state policy, integrating specific civic reforms to secure Pashtun (Muhammadzai) control over governance (Barfield, 2010; Rubin, 2002). During this period, Afghan nationalism was not only about managing diversity within the Pashtun tribes but was also officially extended to all other ethnic groups (Constitution of Afghanistan, 1964, Article 1).

Nadir Shah (1929-1933) had a relatively short rule but significantly reformed the MMG framework and strengthened exclusionary nationalism. He incorporated Pashto into the education system and the official language, reinterpreted national history to favour the dynasty, and emphasised Ahmad Shah Durrani as the symbolic founder of Afghanistan. Additionally, he built clerical and tribal alliances to re-establish legitimacy after the turmoil of the 1920s (Dupree, 1980; Gregorian, 1969; Shahrani, 1986). The 1931 Constitution established a parliament but retained most powers in the hands of the monarch, creating a form of civic nationalism closely associated with Pashtun (Muhammadzai) kingship. His assassination was connected to Abd al-Khaliq, a Hazara student at the Nejat (Amani) High School in 1933. Although many sources acknowledge his involvement, the monarchy politicised the incident to legitimise harsh reprisals against Hazaras, deepening suppression through various taxes and restrictions (Mousavi, 1998; Rubin, 2002; Saikal, 2004).

After Nader Shah's death, his son Zahir Shah (1933-1973) took power. During his forty years of governance, he supervised a cautious modernisation while diligently safeguarding ethnic hierarchies. The government forced the resettlement of Pashtun populations in northern regions, relocating tribes to areas primarily inhabited by Tajiks and Uzbeks to alter local demographics (Noelle, 1998; Rubin, 2002; Shahrani, 1986). Due to reliance on Tajik bureaucratic personnel, Dari remained the primary language of administration and among the elite; however, Pashto was emphasised in nationalist rhetoric (Barfield, 2010; Gregorian, 1969; Rasanayagam, 2003). National symbols, including flags, anthems, royal portraiture on currency, Independence Day celebrations, and official narratives, all served as indications of a modern Afghan identity. However, the core message of Afghan nationalism remained the same: Afghanistan had been predominantly ruled by Pashtuns, with Muhammadzai monarchs serving as unifying and legitimate leaders (Barfield, 2010; Dupree, 1980).

During this era, some government-supported institutions were established to boost Afghan nationalism, such as Kabul University (1932), the "Pashto Tolana" [Pashto Academy] (1937), and the Aryana Encyclopedia project (Gregorian, 1969; Ruttig, 2011). These institutions aimed to standardise the Pashto language, promote pride in Afghan nationalist history, and strengthen the bond between Afghan identity and Pashtun roots. However, other reformist-nationalist movements began to appear outside the strict oversight of the monarchy, such as "The Wesh Zalmian" (Awakened Youth). Its members, young educators, journalists, and intellectuals, founded their movement in Kandahar in 1947. They advocated for constitutional reform, increased participation, and social justice (Kakar, 1979; Poullada, 1970; Saikal, 2004). However, expressed in modernist language, Wesh Zalmian still maintained Pashtun primacy as the core of Afghan identity. They were briefly tolerated during Zahir Shah's liberal era but were eventually suppressed when their demands conflicted with the dynasty's interests; yet, they went on to spread the seeds of later political currents, such as Islamist, Marxist, and nationalist, that reshaped Afghan politics in the 1960s and 1970s (Maley, 2009; Rasanayagam, 2003; Rubin, 2002).

Externally, the Muhammadzai dynasty made the "Pashtunistan issue" a key element of Afghan nationalist rhetoric. Just after Pakistan's independence in 1947, Muhammadzai leaders raised territorial claims over Pashtun residents' areas beyond the Durand Line. The dynasty was the only government to oppose Pakistan's membership in the United Nations General Assembly that year. By doing so, the dynasty portrayed itself as true defenders of Pashtun rights, alongside the Durand Line, to gain domestic popularity. This policy strained relations

with Pakistan, but helped the dynasty to shift political attention from internal issues to external territorial ones (Maley, 2009; Rubin, 2002). Within the country, the monarchy managed a slow process of modernisation. Educational institutions expanded, Kabul's intellectual scene progressed, and the 1964 Constitution established parliamentary governance and formal civil liberties; however, all supported the monarchy and aligned with Afghan nationalist ideologies (Dupree, 1980; Rubin, 2002; Saikal, 2004). For instance, it was the first time the term "Afghan" became the label for all residents of Afghanistan, regardless of their ethnic background (Constitution of Afghanistan, 1964, Article 1). A few Tajiks held positions in education and administration, while Hazaras and Uzbeks remained underrepresented, and land disputes, especially between Kuchi nomads and Hazara farmers, have fuelled ongoing resentment (Emadi, 1990; Mousavi, 1998; Shahrani, 1986). In addition, it was the first time the Mohammadzai monarchy had received foreign support from both the United States and the Soviet Union simultaneously.

Overall, the paradox of Zahir Shah's nationalism is apparent. The monarchy promoted ethno-civic nationalism and projected stability. At the same time, it strengthened the MMG structure without addressing inter-communal grievances (Barfield, 2010; Noelle, 1998; Rubin, 2002). As a result, by the early 1970s, inequality had grown, urban unrest had intensified, and the rise of Islamist and Marxist movements exposed the fragility of the monarchical nationalist reforms. The 1973 coup by Daoud Khan ended the monarchy and inaugurated a new phase of nationalist experimentation under republican and later communist banners (Maley, 2009; Rasanayagam, 2003; Rubin, 2002). Nevertheless, the monarchy's legacy of the MMG continued, and ethno-civic nationalism was incorporated into state policy, leading to political hesitancy that became evident during the post-2001 Republic.

3.3.5 Republican Pashtun Nationalism (1973–1978)

Muhammad Daoud Khan, a Muhammadzai prince, organised a coup against his cousin Zahir Shah in 1973, overthrowing the monarchy and establishing a republican regime. However, this shift did not really change the principles of Afghan nationalism. Instead, Daoud rebranded nationalism in a republican form, characterised by a centralised, developmental, and coercive governance structure, while still upholding the core principle that state authority was rooted in Pashtun (Muhammadzai) dominance (Barfield, 2010; Rubin, 2002). As a result, he promptly dismissed the communist supporters who had supported him in the coup, because they mainly consisted of Ghilzai tribes and Tajik figures. Therefore, his republican regime

strengthened longstanding patterns of MMG through three interconnected mechanisms: identity framing, centralisation, and foreign patronage.

The regime maintained ethnonationalism through a republican facade. So, the executive authority remained predominantly Pashtun, with recruitment and promotions preferring the Muhammadzai kin and their associates. Pashto was upheld as a symbol of primacy despite Dari's administrative dominance (Barfield, 2022). By emphasising Pashtunistan and territorial claims beyond the Durand Line, Daud presented himself as a genuine advocate for Pashtun rights. His territorial claims shifted public focus away from domestic exclusion and protected Pashtun elites from addressing structural inequalities, thereby escalating tensions with Pakistan (Maley, 2009; Rubin, 2002). He intensified centralisation by expanding the various coercive apparatuses. Daoud strengthened the intelligence services, extended presidential control over ministries and provincial administrations, and curtailed political pluralism (Barfield, 2022; Rubin, 2002). He swiftly crushed the Islamist groups' uprising of 1975, forcing many militants to flee to Pakistan, where they later established movements that would return to Afghanistan by force (Coll, 2004; Roy, 1990). Initially, Daoud was dependent on the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), especially the Ghilzai Pashtuns of its Khalq faction; however, he soon marginalised both the Khalq and Parcham groups.

He strengthened his authority via his own National Revolutionary Party and a network of Muhammadzai kinship and clients, thereby establishing a personalised rule under the 1977 Constitution (Hyman, 2002). Again, Daoud restructured the MMG with a republican guise, combining family-based patronage with centralised, authoritarian authority. Foreign support remained vital to his regime. Although Daoud sought to diversify Afghanistan's external alliances, his regime continued to rely heavily on Soviet subsidies and military assistance. The Pashtunistan territorial claim strategy amplified this reliance, as escalating tensions with Pakistan made Kabul increasingly dependent on Moscow for financial and security support (Maley, 2009; Rubin, 2002). Very soon, he became disappointed with Moscow's financial support and sought to align with the US; however, this shift worried the Soviets, leading them to remove Daoud Khan from power.

Overall and analytically, Daoud's Republic represented a rupture in form but not in substance. He changed the regime's name from a monarchy to a republic, but the governing structure remained the same. His republic's nature continued to embody the MMG, an identity politics formed by Afghan (Muhammadzai) nationalism, authority sustained through

centralised coercion, and stability maintained by external rents. By 1977-78, he escalated his repressive actions against leftist groups, and a careful change in foreign policy, moving away from Moscow, provoked a protest from the elite. The Saur Revolution in April 1978 toppled the Republic and ushered in a period of socialist governance. However, the PDPA's efforts soon ran up against firmly established ethnic cleavages, which fragmented the national project they sought to redefine (Hyman, 2002; Maley, 2009).

3.3.6 Communist Nationalism and Fragmentation (1978–1992)

The Saur Revolution of April 1978 not only concluded nearly 150 years of the Muhammadzai dynasty but also terminated Durrani dominance over the kingdom; however, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) did not dismantle the MMG or its ethnonationalist ideology; instead, it reconfigured them into a form of communist nationalism. The Khalq faction, led by Nur Mohammad Taraki and Hafizullah Amin, consisted mainly of rural Pashtuns from the lower middle class, especially those from Ghilzai tribes in Logar, Ghazni, and Paktia (Hyman, 2002; Rubin, 2002). In this sense, the revolution was both ideological and tribal, because the aristocratic Muhammadzai-Durrani domination was only replaced by Ghilzai dominance, represented through Marxist-Leninist discourse, while the underlying MMG remained intact. The rival Parcham faction, led by Babrak Karmal, was more urban, cosmopolitan, and ethnically diverse, but was swiftly brought under Khalqi control (Hyman, 2002; Maley, 2009). The communist nationalism experience demonstrated the MMG's durable legacy, which persisted even after the Muhammadzai dynasty had lost power.

Once in power, the Khalqis sought radical reforms at a breakneck speed, including land redistribution, compulsory literacy, and restrictions on clerical authority. To impose its ideology, the regime resorted to various brutal repression methods, including mass arrests, executions, and forced displacements. In Pashtun rural areas, these measures, especially the land distribution policy, were seen less as liberation and more as the imposition of an alien regime dominated by the Ghilzai figures, while non-Pashtuns perceived the state as both limited in ethnic scope and ideologically foreign, which increased opposition (Roy, 1990; Rubin, 2002). In these regions, opposition was seen as rooted in Islam and as a defence of local communities. The Soviet intervention in December 1979 rescued the PDPA, but it exposed its weakness. Moscow replaced Khalqi leader Amin with Parchami leader Babrak Karmal in an attempt to broaden the government's legitimacy. However, the Soviet military presence enabled the opposition to portray the war as both a jihad against the foreign occupation and as

a struggle against an infidel regime imposed from Kabul (Hyman, 2002). Even in Pashtun areas, the PDPA was criticised as an urban, Ghilzai-controlled, and externally enforced regime, which worsened Pashtun tribal divisions.

By the mid-1980s, Najibullah Ahmadzai, a member of the Ghilzai sub-tribe, a Parchami, and former intelligence chief, endeavoured to rebrand the regime through a process of "national reconciliation." So, he moderated socialist rhetoric, renamed the PDPA to "Hezb-e Watan," and moved towards patronage politics. This entailed integrating local power brokers, such as arming Uzbek militias under Abdul Rashid Dostum, engaging Hazara groups, and making agreements with local commanders (Giustozzi, 2009; Rubin, 2002); however, it restored the Muhammadzai rentier monarchy to buy tribal loyalties rather than fostering inclusive civic participation, where this time, the Soviets' aid supported negotiations with regional elites. As the conflict continued, the regime's stability depended more on the Soviet's aid and fragmented militia networks than on ideology, reinforcing the main themes of the MMG: Pashtun dominance, centralisation, and foreign backing - even within socialist rhetoric, while PDPA nationalism was contradictory; Khalqis claimed to champion revolutionary modernism but depended on tribal exclusion and labelled opponents as anti-Pashtun; however, the Parchamis styled themselves as cosmopolitan but were perceived as the Soviet's clients. Finally, the regime's collapse in 1992 revealed the failure of ethno-communist nationalism. So, the PDPA regime failed to dismantle the MMG legacy; it simply transferred the dominance from the Durrani Muhammadzai to the Ghilzai Khalqis, while still relying on Soviet support. In this way, the communist era also did not replace Afghan nationalism with civic nationalism; instead, it elevated it within a socialist lens. This shows how the MMG and ethnonationalism endured as influential aspects in state-building, even under revolutionary socialism.

3.3.7 Mujahideen and Ethno-Jihadist Nationalism (1992–1996)

The Mujahideen honoured the fall of Najibullah's Soviet-backed government in April 1992 as a triumph for jihad and the re-establishment of Islamic-national sovereignty. For more than a decade, various Mujahideen factions, funded by the U.S. and supported through Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, had fought against the PDPA and its Soviet allies, presenting their struggle as both a religious responsibility and a fight for national liberation; however, once the common enemy was defeated, that unity quickly unravelled. Instead of establishing an Islamic state and promoting inclusivity, Afghanistan plunged into a phase of violent rivalry and civil war among

Mujahideen factions, where ethnic mobilisation and jihadist rhetoric converged into what I termed it as ethno-jihadist nationalism (Hyman, 2002; Maley, 2009; Rubin, 2002).

The Mujahideen had never been a unified front in essence. In the 1980s, resistance groups arose as fragmented entities, each with different ethnic, regional, and ideological affiliations; yet they came together under a shared Jihadist ideology opposing occupation. They were, Hezb-e Islami (Hekmatyar) and Hezb-e Islami (Khalis), mainly Pashtun; Jamiat-e Islami and its Shura-ye Nazar network led by Burhanuddin Rabani and Ahmad Shah Massoud, primarily Tajik; Ittehad-e Islami (Sayyaf), a Salafi-influenced, Saudi-backed group with strong Pashtun connections; Harakat-e Inqilab-e Islami (Nabi Mohammadi), associated with rural Pashtun clerics; Mahaz-e Milli (Gailani), a monarchist group mostly Pashtun; Hezb-e Wahdat, represented Hazara Shia (Abdul Ali Mazari); and Junbish-e Milli (Abdul Rashid Dostum), which had an Uzbek-Turkmen base in the north. All invoked the idiom of jihad, but their social bases, recruitment, and sponsorship were favourably ethnicised and regionalised (Coll, 2004; Dorronsoro, 2005; Giustozzi, 2009; Rubin, 2002).

When the Mujahideen units entered Kabul in April 1992, efforts to establish inclusive governance rapidly disintegrated. The Peshawar Accords[22] installed a Tajik, Burhanuddin Rabbani, as interim president and Massoud as defence minister. Soon, the Tajik-led state showed reluctance to accommodate the Hazaras into the state meaningfully, so it decided to eliminate Hazaras through a military operation targeting them, which resulted in the mass killing of innocent residents of the Afshar district in Kabul. The Uzbeks, who demanded a minimum level of regional autonomy, were also disappointed with the Tajik-led government's absolutism. At the same time, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a Ghilzai Pashtun, repeatedly conducted indiscriminate bombings of Kabul in an attempt to sideline the Tajik-led government and other ethnic factions. He initially signed the Peshawar Accords but later denied power-sharing. In line with the historic Pashtun domination of the state, he sought absolute power and aimed to establish an exclusive state under his control.

Subsequently, the conflict among rival factions devastated Kabul, displaced hundreds of thousands, and resulted in substantial civilian casualties, generally estimated in the tens of

[22] Many Mujahideen leaders in Pakistan signed the Peshawar Accord in April 1992, which appointed Sibghatullah Mojaddedi as interim president for two months, succeeded by Burhanuddin Rabbani for four months, with a Defence Council led by Ahmad Shah Massoud (Maley, 2009; Rubin, 2002).

thousands, with some estimates exceeding fifty thousand (Dorronsoro, 2005; Maley, 2009). Very soon, liberation from the communists was swiftly replaced by urban destruction and factional predation. Mujahideen leaders, who rhetorically pledged Islamic unity and national stability, nevertheless, in practice, their conflict developed into rival ethno-jihadist factions. The disputes and sieges of Kabul's districts, the indiscriminate shelling of civilian neighbourhoods, and the fluidity of factional alliances demonstrated how the lasting legacy of the MMG had eroded any chances for inclusive governance, even long after the Muhammadzai dynasty (Barfield, 2022; Dorronsoro, 2005; Giustozzi, 2009). Hence, this contradiction within Mujahideen jihadist nationalism, between rhetoric and practice, reproduces the rhetorical character of Afghan nationalism, which oscillates between inclusivity and exclusivity, as discussed previously in section 3.2.3.

Overall, during this period, foreign support continued to deepen these divisions. The U.S. and Pakistan backed Pashtun Islamist factions, Iran supported Hezb-e Wahdat, Uzbekistan endorsed Junbish, and Saudi Arabia backed Wahhabi groups (Coll, 2004; Dorronsoro, 2005). Meanwhile, the Tajik-led Islamic State in Kabul struggled to integrate the Hazaras in a meaningful way. Uzbek leaders sought limited autonomy, while Pashtun factions aspired to absolute dominance, each justifying their actions in the guise of jihad. Eventually, the civil war and collapse in 1996 were driven not by ethnic diversity but by the attempts of the Mujahideen to construct their own versions of the MMG, through the politicisation of identity into exclusionary jihadist nationalism, centralisation without inclusivity, and ongoing dependence on external support. Therefore, the Mujahideen's failure was attributable not solely to organisational fragmentation, but also to ideological continuity; they replaced the actors, not the model, and opted not to dismantle the MMG, which continues to be the leading cause of conflict and state collapse in Afghanistan since the late nineteenth century.

3.3.8 Talibanism: Talibanist Nationalism (1996–2001)

The rise of the Taliban represented an important milestone in Afghan nationalist history, combining strict Islamic laws with ethnonationalism to form a rigid and exclusive ideology, which can be termed "Talibanist Nationalism." The movement was founded in Kandahar in 1994 by students who had been educated in madrassas among Afghan refugees in Pakistan. They drew on Deobandi teachings and utilised cross-border sanctuaries. They presented themselves as the remedy to chaos and the restorers of Islamic order during the Mujahideen's conflict. Many of its recruiters were young Pashtun men who were promised that they would

restore security by enforcing strict Sharia law and establishing a Pashtun-centred social order. This message was particularly well-received in the southern provinces, where Pashtuns are the majority. This can be seen as a radicalised evolution of the MMG, initially established by Abd al-Raḥman Khan (Giustozzi, 2009; Rashid, 2010); however, the contrast is striking as Abd al-Raḥman Khan was a prince who represented the Muhammadzai/Durrani aristocracy, while the Taliban came from ordinary Ghilzai and Kandahari Pashtun networks that had long been excluded from state power and were shaped by war, poverty, and discrimination.

The Taliban leaders publicly declared that a strict interpretation of Islam was essential for unity in Afghanistan; Nevertheless, this rhetoric was inseparable from Pashtun-Taliban primacy. Most of the leadership and fighters came from southern Pashtun areas, and military operations mainly focused on non-Pashtun regions. Their atrocities, including the 1998 Hazara massacres in Mazar-i-Sharif and Bamiyan, as well as the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, exemplify the severe actions associated with religious fundamentalism and ethnic exclusion driven by Taliban nationalism (Maley, 2009; Mousavi, 1998). Additionally, unlike the Durrani monarchs, who legitimised their rule through dynastic right, Taliban leaders gained legitimacy through religious clerical support and militias rooted in Kandahari and Ghilzai networks. This shift in legitimacy sources appeared as a revolt against tribal corruption and autocracy; however, in practice, it backed a highly centralised Taliban rule (Edwards, 2002; Giustozzi, 2009). Also, Pakistan supported the Taliban by providing sanctuary, training, and logistical help. At the same time, Saudi Arabia and Gulf donors gave financial aid and ideological backing (Rashid, 2010). These external resources nurtured the earlier patterns of MMG, a mono-ethnic centralised movement of the Taliban through military mobilisation, which allowed the Taliban to seize Kabul in 1996 and establish the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan.

Therefore, the rise of Talibanism radicalised the longstanding MMG by merging Pashtun ethnonationalism with an unyielding form of Islamist extremism, thus transforming Afghan nationalism into Talibanist nationalism. In this process, the Taliban reinterpreted the MMG, stripping it of any civic attributes. This history shaped the subsequent Republic, in which ruling elites continued to employ the same blend of identity framing, centralisation, and external support to develop their ambivalent counterinsurgency strategies.

3.3.9 Brotherhood Nationalism and Political Reluctance (2001–2021)

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2001-2021) was the state that received the highest level of funding for state-building in the post-Cold War era. Besides the generous international

community's assistance, only the U.S. provided more than $145 billion in reconstruction aid and $2.3 trillion in overall war expenses, in addition to considerable human costs (SIGAR, 2016a, 2021, 2022c). However, it fell apart in just a few days, surprising the world and exposing a paradox in the outcomes of foreign intervention. Despite massive military and financial support and international aid, the Republic could not or would not defend itself for its survival. So, this cannot be fully explained by corruption or limited capacity, as, given this massive assistance, it was unlikely to produce an unexpected outcome such as collapse. The leading factor was what this study refers to as "brotherhood nationalism," a Pashtun-centric mindset that viewed insurgents as brothers and kin, imposed limited coercion or selective enforcement, and guided policy through donor-funded patronage. Once again in Afghanistan's history, a new regime did not break from the past but instead redefined the long-standing MMG, Pashtun dominance, expressed through Afghan nationalist language, centralisation enshrined in the 2004 Constitution, and reliance on foreign support fueled by U.S. aid and the international community. All of this was rearticulated within a democratic discourse, but this time, political reluctance was placed at the core of the state.

During both presidencies, brotherhood nationalism operated through three main mechanisms: identity politics, which portrayed insurgents as kin; selective law enforcement and ease of coercion in Pashtun areas, as well as accommodating co-ethnic figures in the state's positions; and donor-supported patronage that nurtured this system (Goodhand & Hakimi, 2014; SIGAR, 2016a, 2021). These mechanisms were consistent with the Taliban's MMG; however, the Republic reworded the MMG in democratic language, demonstrating that Pashtun dominance and external rents continued to constrain the Republic, as they had in previous regimes. The fundamental distinction is evident: Abd al-Rahman Khan and subsequently the Taliban regime depended on foreign rents to uphold Afghan nationalism through coercion, whereas the Republic utilised foreign rents to foster Afghan nationalism through reconciliation. So, the distinction was in the method, rather than in the principle.

Overall, Abd al-Rahman Khan ruled in the late nineteenth century, a time when external subsidies imposed few normative constraints and coercion was the primary means of maintaining authority. Using British rents, he imposed Afghanism and Islamism (Afghanisation/Pashtunisation) through coercion with almost no oversight. In contrast, the Republic was governed under the supervision of international donors, a context characterised by symbolic democracy and foreign aid as a means of development and reconstruction, which made coercion politically and diplomatically costly for Pashtun constituencies. To bypass this,

the leaders instead distributed foreign assistance to loyalty networks, carried out prisoner releases, and launched reconciliation initiatives, which they presented as acts of goodwill and brotherhood against their co-ethnic insurgents. Therefore, the only difference was in the methods: coercion versus sympathy, while the outcome remained consistent: maintaining the MMG, so embedding political reluctance in Afghan governance; however, the United States and the international community bore the costs, and the Afghan people faced the consequences of ongoing conflict and instability. The following section examines the ethnic politics in the post-2001 Republic, focusing on the presidencies of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani. The section shows how ethnic politics constrained counterinsurgency efforts and how Afghan nationalism was expressed in daily acts of restraint, thereby producing political reluctance across all layers of government, and ultimately hastening the fall of the Republic.

3.4 Ethnic Politics in the Republic (2001–2021): Karzai and Ghani

So far, the study has explained that three elements of Afghan nationalism, centralisation and aid dependency, emerged between 1880 and 2001 across different regimes as a political legacy, which this study termed MMG. These political orders profoundly shaped the state ideology, orientation and behaviour of the post-Taliban regime of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021. Afghan nationalism shaped the Afghan president's behaviour, while centralisation enabled them to pursue ethnic policies with minimal accountability, and foreign aid provided the funds for these policies. So, the post-2001 Republic not only inherited the institutional framework established at the Bonn Conference, but also the enduring political tradition of MMG, in which Afghan nationalism was framed simultaneously as the national interest and as state ideology (Barfield, 2022; Rubin, 2002). This Afghan governance custom, initially created by Abd al-Raḥman Khan with British support, was later enhanced, civilised and reinforced by successive Muhammadzai regimes. It ultimately had become the core foundation of state authority for later regimes (Barfield, 2022; Saikal, 2004). Likewise, the long-standing traditional legacy of MMG greatly influenced the presidencies of Hamid Karzai (2001–2014) and Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai (2014–2021). Despite unprecedented foreign aid, international support, and a security force that, on paper, consisted of over 300,000 personnel, both leaders exhibited significant political ambivalences, moving away from decisive confrontations with the Taliban while prioritising co-ethnic solidarity and patronage over peace and stability (Goodhand & Hakimi, 2014; SIGAR, 2016a, 2021, 2022c). In this regard, Karzai and Ghani inverted Abd al-Raḥman Khan's strategy. The nineteenth-century monarch,

supported by British rents, imposed Afghanism-Islamism through coercion; whereas the Republic, reliant on Western aid and a multi-ethnic coalition, upheld the same ideology through accommodation and reconciliation. Thus, both approaches reinforced ethnonationalism through MMG. Abd al-Raḥman resorted to violence, whilst the Republic chose self-restraint.

Both Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani repeatedly used brotherly or conciliatory language when addressing the Taliban. This kind of political discourse is identified in this study as "fraternal discourse." Hamid Karzai often depicted the Taliban as "Barādar-e Nārāzī" [the discontent brother, or the unhappy brother] and also as "Afghans" who were being misled by foreign interference, emphasising that they remained part of the Afghan national community rather than an alien enemy. He said that the Taliban members were Afghan and Muslim and stated that Afghans should not fight for a foreign country's interests. Also, in his public speeches and interviews, he often referred to insurgents as "brothers," "misguided brothers," or "our Taliban brothers," and advised that their rebellion was due to external influences rather than internal dissent (BBC News, 2010; Burke, 2014; CBS News, 2013; Pajhwok News, 2011; TOLOnews, 2013, 2020c). However, following the Kabul bombing in May 2017, and for once, he, as ex-president, commented that he could "no longer call them brothers," implicitly acknowledging the political controversy surrounding the term and the boundaries of rhetorical inclusion (Ariana News, 2017; TOLOnews, 2017).

Moreover, the surge of violence in 2007-2008 marked a critical juncture in the political discourse of the Afghan presidency. During the peak of suicide bombings and insurgent attacks, as highlighted in UNAMA's Annual Report on the Protection of Civilians (UNAMA, 2009) but Hamid Karzai changed his public message from condemning the violence to promoting national reconciliation. He started to portray insurgents not as enemies, but as misguided Afghan brothers who could be reintegrated into the Afghan community. Similarly, SIGAR's Lessons Learned reports (2021-2023) show that Karzai's sympathetic discourse, even during insurgent attacks, normalised reconciliation efforts, shielding Taliban rank-and-file fighters, which the regime used to strengthen its prestige before the Pashtun population[23]. This

[23] Unlike conventional Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR), where insurgents are expected to lay down their arms, agree to peace, and begin reintegration, Karzai's reconciliation efforts lacked genuine DDR initiatives. There was no real disarmament or demobilisation, and Taliban leaders explicitly rejected peace agreements. In contrast to the earlier mujahideen, who agreed to disarm their fighters and were integrated into the Afghan government, the Taliban continued their hostilities despite government reconciliation offers. Karzai's language of reconciliation served more as a political message to present himself as the defender of Pashtun constituencies against the US, international forces, and Afghan forces, rather than as a genuine DDR initiative.

development evolved into what this study called “brotherhood nationalism.” Meanwhile, Karzai increasingly emphasised that the insurgency’s strength stemmed from “safe havens” and “proxy wars” just across the border (Pakistan). He insisted that “the Taliban will not be able to move a finger without Pakistani support” (Reuters, 2010, 2011). This rhetoric of fraternal inclusion and externalising the root of violence had become a key element of the Afghan state’s messaging about insurgency. Similarly, SIGAR later observed that this affected the government’s reconciliation narrative, portraying insurgents as reconcilable fellow Afghans deceived by foreign backers (SIGAR, 2016a, 2019b, 2021).

The brotherhood discourse was not just about words but also real government actions. Policies of restraint, reconciliation, and selective engagement were implemented in a way that represented the principles of brotherhood nationalism. Karzai firmly objected to the ISAF’s airstrikes, night raids, and house searches in Pashtun-majority regions, cautioning that such actions might alienate local communities and result in heightened resistance to the government (Gopal, 2014; SIGAR, 2016a, 2021; Synovitz, 2011). Likewise, the Musa Qala truce of 2006 in Helmand demonstrated this strategy, although authority was handed over to local elders and former Taliban members; insurgents regained control within a few months (Reuters, 2007; UK Parliament Defence Committee, 2007). Similarly, Karzai continuously released Taliban detainees and often gave them stipends or clothing, which analysts saw as acts of reconciliation rather than punishment (SIGAR, 2021; Synovitz, 2011). For many soldiers, such measures were demoralising. Afghan security officials expressed frustration that detainees captured at significant personal risk were subsequently released by the government, often returning to the battlefield. In July 2014, Kabul police chief General Zahir (Tajik) publicly blamed a series of attacks on individuals who had recently been released from the Detention Facility in Parwan, while Defence Minister Bismillah Khan (Tajik) told parliament that released Taliban were “now leading the attacks in Afghanistan.” Vice President Yunes Qanuni (Tajik) similarly warned: “We knew that when they were released from prison, they would return to the battlefields and commit more crimes (Clark, 2014).

Similarly, Ghani also sought to improve the Taliban’s image by portraying them as political actors, rather than insurgents. In his speech at the U.S. Institute of Peace, he described the Taliban as his “political opposition,” commenting that they had a level of legitimacy that could not be ignored (Giustozzi, 2015; Malkasian, 2021). Additionally, by 2018, he went further, offering to engage the Taliban “without preconditions” and proposing to recognise them as a legitimate political group within a constitutional framework (Hellman, 2018).

Likewise, Afghan officials and international mediators generally regarded his focus on negotiation instead of military victory as a strategy of accommodation rather than coercion (Malkasian, 2021; SIGAR, 2022c). So, during his presidency, Ghani highlighted the Taliban's Afghan identity by calling them "fellow Afghans" and depicting them as "stakeholders in peace" instead of enemies. This reflected an attempt to integrate the insurgency into a national reconciliation narrative, which avoided military coercion but desired to gain the Taliban's loyalty under his leadership (Malkasian, 2021).

Furthermore, Ghani followed in Karzai's footsteps with similar actions. The nationwide Eid ceasefires in June 2018 and May 2020 allowed Taliban fighters to enter major cities, where they could pray in mosques and socialise openly with civilians and security personnel; however, these events, proclaimed as confidence-building measures, blurred the line between adversaries and allies, and SIGAR concluded that these actions negatively affected the Afghan national army's morale and cohesion (SIGAR, 2019b, 2021). The Doha Agreement was signed on 29 February 2020, under U.S. pressure, Kabul agreed to release up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners. Many of these prisoners rapidly rejoined the fighting, further damaging frontline morale (SIGAR, 2021). Similarly, SIGAR (2023) conducted another investigation about why the Afghan army collapsed, documenting repeated complaints from field units about uneven burdens, such as non-Pashtun formations disproportionately bearing the worst of combat. Also, military operations in Pashtun-majority areas were selectively restricted. Units also reported shortages of supplies and fuel, which supports the perception that leadership was reluctant to genuinely support them. Ghani frequently dismissed U.S.-trained military officers and qualified non-Pashtun commanders in favour of his co-ethnic commanders loyal to him, besides frequent orders to retreat from rural areas, leaving behind war machinery and ammunition. In a testimony to Congress, SIGAR stated that repeated prisoner exchanges and Taliban detainee releases fostered a sense of abandonment within the Afghan national security forces and lowered morale across units. Therefore, the evidence shows that fraternal discourse was translated into material practices and had a significant impact on soldiers' perceptions. By redefining insurgents as kin, Karzai and Ghani reduced the moral and political space for coercion, legitimised flexible policies, and weakened the cohesion of the Afghan army (Clark, 2014; Goodhand & Hakimi, 2014; SIGAR, 2021, 2022c, 2023).

3.5 Summary

This chapter demonstrates that politics in the Republic were heavily influenced by Afghan nationalism, which was closely linked to Pashtun dominance, a phenomenon this study refers to as brotherhood nationalism, which led to a steady pattern of reluctance. Placing Karzai and Ghani within the Afghan historical context of nationalism shows that this hesitancy was not solely due to weak leadership but because of the long-standing Muhammadzai Model of Governance (MMG). This model highlights the role of identity, institutions, and reliance on external rents, which together constitute a rigid, highly centralised, ethnically based state structure established during Abd al-Rahman Khan's reign and implemented through coercion and British Indian subsidies. The MMG has become the core of Afghan governance for the eras to come. It defined Afghan identity by ethnonationalism and Islamic legitimacy, executed through coercive centralisation, and supported by foreign support. Nonetheless, this model was inherited and repurposed by successive regimes, including monarchical, republican, socialist, Taliban, and democratic ones; however, none of them dismantled the MMG framework. Likewise, during the post-2001 Republic, the MMG re-emerged through three interlocking mechanisms of identity issues, institutional opportunities, and aid-driven incentives, which directed significant international resources towards rentier deals and nurtured a war economy that stabilised low-level conflict rather than seeking a clear victory.

This analysis highlights two main insights. Foremost, the fall of the Republic was not due to ethnic diversity or fragile institutions, though it mainly stemmed from elite strategies influenced by ethnicity. It is because non-Pashtun groups, including the Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks ethnic leaders, and many marginalised Pashtun tribes generally demonstrated alignment despite being excluded from decision-making; however, the president's focus on narrow ethnic interests in the counterinsurgency strategy resulted in paralysed governance. Additionally, ethnonationalism can constrain the state, even with substantial international support, enabling insurgencies to endure not solely through strength but also through elite self-restraint. This ending sets the stage for the succeeding chapters. Chapter 4 examines how the 2004 Constitution strengthened presidential centralisation, thereby enabling selective enforcement at both the legal and administrative levels. Similarly, Chapter 5 explains the symbiotic economic ties, which, due to massive aid inflows, led to the development of a war economy rather than effective governance.

Chapter 4: Constitutional Centralisation

The Constitution of 2004 was assumed to establish a robust foundation for democracy, peace, and stability following many years of conflict (Hart, 2001; J. A. Thier, 2003). However, rather than promoting renewal, the national document perpetuated a pattern of centralised governance that vested substantial executive presidential authority (Hussaini, 2022). Although aimed at harmonising the state functions, it paradoxically restricted its capacity for development. The political institutions created by this Constitution often hesitated and, at times, were unwilling to lead Afghanistan towards development and lasting peace (Murtazashvili, 2022). However, when the Republic collapsed in 2021, its shortcomings had become unmistakable (SIGAR, 2021). In practice, the Constitution embedded a built-in reluctance that stalled decision-making at all levels of the state and dismissed mechanisms of accountability. This reinforced a pattern of personalised rule, consistent with the historical custom of the Muhammadzai Model of Governance (MMG), thereby enabling leaders to prioritise Afghan nationalism over efforts toward peace and stability. Once over-centralisation diminished the provinces' capacity to address regional security and governance issues, political rivalry emerged among officials seeking access to rent rather than prioritising policy and accountability. Foreign aid also mainly contributed to these issues by channelling support through the executive branch. International donors established "aid networks" that tended to reward loyalty rather than prioritise effectiveness. As a result, in this political environment, delay, avoidance, and the preservation of power appeared more rational than pursuing reform or taking risks. Hence, in pursuit of stability through centralisation, Afghanistan rebuilt its post-2001 political order on the very foundation that would ensure its fragility.

This chapter explains the concept of "constitutional centralisation," a system that appears democratic in form but functions as a dictatorship in practice. This centralisation enabled Afghan presidents to pursue narrow ethnic or political agendas with minimal accountability and the least meaningful mechanisms of checks and balances. Thus, it incorporated political hesitation and selective governance directly into the core of the state's legal and institutional structure. The Constitution shifted reluctance from just a behavioural tendency to a structural one by centralising power in the presidency and limiting participation in the interest of unity. However, presidents possessed extensive formal powers; they were incentivised to act with caution, prioritising personal and ethnic interests over reform or confrontation with the Taliban.

Also, the regime chose not to question either these priorities or the president, while international patrons were also hesitant to enforce accountability, thereby further entrenching executive dominance. Jointly, these dynamics perpetuated a political order incapable of self-correction. So, this analysis argues that the 2004 Constitution facilitated the emergence of "ambivalent presidents" who avoided confronting the co-ethnic insurgency, a "reluctant regime," a state that was either unwilling or unable to hold the president accountable for ethnically motivated policies, and finally "reluctant international patrons," external actors whose political and financial involvement further solidified executive dominance.

At the individual level, the Constitution enabled ambivalent presidents to prioritise their narrow ethnic interests with the least accountability. So, they narrowed decision-making to a small circle of loyalists, depending on rent-seeking to reward supporters and sustain fragile alliances (SIGAR, 2022c). However, the Constitution granted them nearly unrestricted authority (Hussaini, 2022; Shafaee, 2024; J. A. Thier, 2003). It seems that the presidents used this authority primarily to maintain ethnic balance and to dominate factions rather than to implement significant reforms. Their ambivalent behaviours in addressing the Taliban insurgency were driven more by strategic calculations than by incapacity, since such measures might have alienated parts of their Pashtun base. Hence, both leaders utilised a strategy of selective accommodation, encompassing gestures of reconciliation, prisoner releases, and peace-oriented rhetoric that obscured the distinction between negotiation and appeasement (SIGAR, 2021, 2022a). In practice, these political considerations frequently centred on preserving the elites' survival rather than prioritising the country's interests. So, it demonstrates that constitutional authority remained strong and stable, despite political paralysis.

At the regime level, the Constitution created a governance framework that relied heavily on presidential power, so that other state entities, such as the parliament, judiciary, and provincial administrations, continued to be subordinate to the executive. In addition, local actors and regional problem-solving were alienated or paralysed. Local governance had the least autonomy, and the judiciary and legislature functioned within limits set by the centre. The system appeared to be constitutionally designed; however, in practice, it functioned as a patrimonial dictatorship, depending on control rather than cooperation to maintain authority (Hussaini, 2022; Murtazashvili, 2015, 2022; SIGAR, 2022c). This centralisation sidelined local communities and influential local power brokers, thereby creating governance gaps that the Taliban exploited. When the insurgency grew, Pashtun presidents sought to consolidate dominance by accommodating the Taliban movement while marginalising non-Pashtun

groups. Leaders of the Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek communities, excluded from substantive power-sharing, perceived the conflict as an internal Pashtun matter, thereby reducing their will and capacity to contest the president or to challenge his decisions.

At the international level, external partners limited their policies to align with the Afghan constitutional framework. By placing the presidency at the centre of political legitimacy, the Constitution locked the United States and its allies into a highly centralised engagement model. Political, financial, and military support was channelled almost entirely through the executive (Goodhand & Hakimi, 2014; Sharan, 2011; SIGAR, 2021). Believing that a strong presidency would ensure stability, donors increased their dependence on Kabul's central government. Paradoxically, increased political support and aid only strengthened presidential dominance, widened patronage networks, and created incentives and capabilities for both sides of the conflict to escalate rather than de-escalate. Hence, the international community became a hesitant supporter, limited by the political framework it had helped establish.

This chapter argues that the failure of the 2004 Constitution was due not only to its implementation but also to its very design. By institutionalising centralisation and granting extensive authority to the presidency, it fostered a culture of political reluctance that operated at individual, regime, and international levels. This multilayered reluctance diminished accountability, enabling presidents to misuse constitutional authority to prioritise their narrow, ethnically based, and self-serving objectives. The Constitution was designed to foster unity and democratic consolidation; however, it revived the structural logic of the MMG. Finally, the chapter explains the concept of the constitution's centralisation in seven sections as follows. Section One places Afghanistan's constitution within broader debates on constitutional design. Section Two explains the development of Afghan constitutionalism, revealing how the 2004 framework renewed the MMG traditions. Section Three explains how the 2004 Constitution was drafted, considering both national and international influences. Section Four analyses ambivalent presidential behaviours and selective governance, while Section Five examines regime reluctance, manifested through weak institutional constraints and the instrumental use of the Loya Jirga. Section Six discusses international patron reluctance on how donor collaboration, maintained centralisation. Section Seven elucidates how these layers of reluctance collectively enabled presidents to prioritise their narrow ethnic interests while evading accountability and effective counterinsurgency—a dynamic that the Constitution of 2004 advised as a roadmap that best described as state-building for collapse.

4.1 Designing Constitutions for Divided Societies

The central question in debate about constitutional design in a heterogeneous society is whether a constitution intended to unify a divided society would survive if it failed to accommodate diversity appropriately. The answer depends on carefully balancing unity with diversity, as well as central authority with inclusiveness and participation. Since a constitution functions not only as a legal foundation for how power is shared but also as a political agreement within ethnically diverse countries, including those recovering from conflict, it offers a space for various identities and historical narratives to be recognised and negotiated to coexist peacefully (Horowitz, 2000; Lijphart, 1977). In this process, a vital challenge is how to balance pluralism with unity, because in the case of spreading power too widely, it may lead to fragmentation, whereas concentrating power too narrowly could marginalise certain groups, ignite resistance and diminish accountability. Many successful cases confirm that, in deeply divided or heterogeneous societies, constitutional stability depends on viewing societal diversity as a legitimate strength rather than a challenge. Similarly, the international community endorsed the 2004 Constitution amid post-2001 optimism; however, they prioritised unity over diversity. By endorsing the tradition of centralised governance, it merely reiterated existing tensions rather than resolving them (Shafaee, 2024; A. J. Thier, 2020).

Political institutions are vital in influencing whether ethnic and political tensions lead to violence. In diverse societies, the organisation of institutions influences how different groups interact- whether through competition, cooperation, or resource sharing. In line with this, Hartzell and Hoddie (2003) show that excessive concentration of executive power increases the likelihood that elites monopolise power, bypass accountability and push the country towards civil conflict. Similarly, Suberu (2001) suggests that ongoing ethnic rivalry over public resources intensifies competition and diminishes the trust in government institutions in Nigeria (Hartzell & Hoddie, 2003; Suberu, 2001). The mentioned instances indicate that the design of political institutions is more likely to determine whether ethnic disputes are resolved peacefully or escalate. Likewise, Saideman et al. (2002) used the Minorities at Risk dataset (1985–1998) and studied 227 ethnic groups worldwide; their findings confirm that proportional representation systems are more likely to reduce ethnic violence than presidential or federal systems. Reynal-Querol (2002) also proposes that consociational democracy, by encouraging inclusion, reduces the likelihood of ethnic conflict. Hence, the instances mentioned earlier confirm that the label of “democracy” on political institutions does not guarantee that disputes

among competing groups will be mitigated; rather, it depends on whether these institutions are genuinely inclusive and participatory (Saideman et al., 2002; Reynal-Querol, 2002).

Some real-world cases establish the same pattern. In Nigeria, the contest among ethnic elites over state resources continues to endanger democratic principles and national stability (Oladiran, 2013). Ethiopia's ethnic federalism, established in 1991 to recognise minority rights and promote cultural diversity, has faced ongoing instability and a decline in legitimacy due to a limited census (Abebe, 2014). Whereas centralisation in post-2001 Afghanistan, also hampered by a lack of a genuine census, has been marked by instability and a decline in legitimacy. These various outcomes show that decentralisation or centralisation alone cannot guarantee genuine peace; however, outcomes depend heavily on historical context, elite behaviour, and the degree of genuine power-sharing. Hence, a constitution is essential to democratic governance because it outlines how political power is organised, constrained, and legitimised (Elster, 1995). At the same time, it also functions as a symbol of national unity and inclusion in divided societies (Ghai & Galli, 2006). In post-conflict countries, it is vital to draft a new constitution to promote peacebuilding and community reconstruction (Samuels, 2006). However, if the constitution is too rigid, it may impede essential adjustments and provide elites with opportunities to consolidate their hold on power. This may diminish the overall resilience of democracy, thereby rendering it more susceptible to long-term vulnerabilities (Landau, 2013). Therefore, scholars have long debated which constitutional framework best manages divided societies. Donald Horowitz (2000) and Arend Lijphart (1977) introduced two widely recognised yet distinct perspectives: the "integrationist" and "accommodationist" approaches. Horowitz (2000) argues that federal and electoral systems can better foster cooperation among ethnic groups as a genuine means of promoting unity through shared institutions, whereas Lijphart (1977) prefers proportional representation and elite power-sharing as a way to safeguard each group's voice. Both approaches endeavour to establish stability, inclusion, and justice in diverse, multi-ethnic countries (S. Berman, 2006).

Integrationist models, such as those in the United States and South Africa, seek to foster a common civic identity that transcends ethnic divisions to promote citizenship. In contrast, accommodationist systems, such as those in Canada and Lebanon, celebrate cultural diversity, citizenship and recognise minorities. When customised to specific local settings, both models can help strengthen democracy, though neither provides a one-size-fits-all solution. Integration may marginalise certain minorities by empowering majorities, while accommodation can authorise ethnic elites and worsen divisions (McGarry et al., 2008). Berman (2006) also noted

that institutional designs that succeed in one context may not yield the same results in another. Reynolds (2005) compares this to constitutional medicine, emphasising that success ultimately depends on accurate diagnosis and careful handling of considerations. Furthermore, hybrid systems in countries such as Nepal and Timor-Leste demonstrate that flexibility and adaptation to the host country's specific context are important factors (S. Berman, 2006; Reynolds, 2005).

In post-conflict conditions, however, moving beyond ethnic politics is particularly difficult. Years of conflict deepen communal divisions, and elites who gain power through ethnic mobilisation seldom favour inclusion. To help facilitate a smooth transition and participation, transitional governments might begin with ethnic representation; however, achieving lasting peace depends on gradually shifting toward civic governance rather than ethnic-based governance (Simonsen, 2005). Within the accommodationist tradition, consociationalism emphasises two principles of power-sharing and group autonomy. The first ensures to include all major groups in decision-making, while the second allows communities to manage internal affairs such as education and culture (Lijphart, 1977). Together, these underpin a power-sharing democracy. Critics, however, warn that consociationalism can deepen divisions or even encourage secessionism. Because central governments may resist power-sharing out of fear of disintegration, and ethnic parties can dominate politics, turning inclusion into exclusion (Horowitz, 2000). Recent research endorses flexible hybrid approaches that combine accommodation and integration (McGarry et al., 2008). They can merge national unity with group representation; however, there should also be safeguards against ethnonationalism, which can turn representation into dominance. Moreover, elites might endeavour to leverage nationalist narratives to uphold their authority, manipulate resources, thereby intensifying inequality, and impede reform. For this reason, constitutional design in diverse societies must include safeguards against both ethnic dominance and the abuse of power, as well as accommodationist principles, such as decentralisation, minority inclusion, and proportional representation, which are helpful because they reduce the risk of excessive centralisation and help overcome political reluctance that can slow reforms.

Afghanistan's case since 2001 shows how these risks can unfold. The Constitution of 2004, designed with assistance from international partners, adopted an integrationist approach and established a highly centralised system; however, promising inclusive governance, it unintentionally strengthened ethnic domination. While rhetorically promising democracy, it revived the long-standing Afghan custom of MMG in the backbone of the Republic. Pashtun elites used this structure to promote ethnic politics, consolidate power, exclude non-Pashtun

communities and undermine democratic principles (Barfield, 2022; Rubin, 2004). As a result, state-building efforts reproduced the Muhammadzai legacy of centralisation in democratic constitutional form. The result was a system characterised by what this thesis refers to as "constitutional centralisation", an institutional hesitance to delegate or transfer power, even though formal democratic frameworks are in place. This highly centralised structure maintained elite dominance and their narrow interests, eroded accountability and undermined institutional legitimacy, and ended up leading to the Afghan Republic's collapse in 2021. There are three critical lessons for constitution-making in heterogeneous societies, as shown by the Afghan case. Firstly, integrationist techniques utilised in post-conflict contexts may reinforce ethnic domination if they neglect diversity. Secondly, democracy without mechanisms for power-sharing can produce political reluctance, in which leaders cling to control rather than pursue reform. Thirdly, sustainable peace relies on integrating context-specific solutions through inclusive participation, protecting minorities, and establishing a balanced distribution of authority in constitutional design. This literature on constitutional design shows that, while unity is vital, excessive centralisation, coupled with an integrationist approach, may lead to exclusion and jeopardise peace. This recommendation ensures that constitutional design serves as a basis for reconciliation rather than a means of control. Therefore, future efforts in Afghanistan, or in similar contexts, should prioritise inclusive participation, accountable and decentralised governance, local decision-making, and adaptable administrative methods.

4.2 Evolution of Constitutional Centralisation in Afghanistan

The history of Afghanistan's constitutional evolution reflects an ongoing tension between aspirations for modern governance and a deep-rooted tradition of political centralisation. Since the establishment of the Afghan state in the mid-eighteenth century, each ruler has used constitutions not mainly as social contracts but as tools to reinforce executive power and govern a fragmented peripheral region (Barfield, 2022; Rubin, 2002). This process indicates that Afghanistan's constitutional history is closely linked to its tendency to centralise power, as reflected in the MMG, which shows that legitimacy has generally been derived from royal, religious, and external sources rather than from popular consent (Noelle, 1998). Likewise, Abd al-Rahman Khan, a Muhammadzai ruler from 1880 to 1901, laid the foundation of MMG governance by unifying the state after years of internal tribal strife through reforms in the administrative, military, and religious aspects. Although there was no formal written constitution, his rule essentially created an authoritarian regime. He effectively established a

hierarchical bureaucracy, brought Pashtun tribal leaders under Kabul's control, and endorsed royal authority through Islamic legitimacy (Barfield, 2010). This created what can be labelled as Afghanistan's "proto-constitutional centralism," a system in which governance was personalised and vertical yet clothed in religious authenticity.

Similarly, the first official written constitution was promulgated in 1923 under Amanullah Khan, establishing a legal framework delineating the responsibilities of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches (Kakar, 1979), thereby marking an important step in the transition from a traditional patrimonial system to a modern and structured governance system. The Constitution of 1923 established a unitary constitutional monarchy and emphasised national sovereignty. It also expanded the state's influence in rural and religious spheres and diminished local autonomy (Barfield, 2010; Noelle, 1998). Thus, Pashtun tribal leaders, in alliance with religious clerics, rebelled against the regime and specific reforms, including taxation and secular education. The resulting uprisings and Amanullah's abdication in 1929 emphasised a recurring historical problem: efforts at constitutional modernisation in Afghanistan often resulted in increased centralisation. This, in turn, tended to alienate the very social groups that these reforms aimed to involve (Barfield, 2010; Noelle, 1998).

Later, Nadir Shah (r. 1929-1933) promulgated the 1931 Constitution that preserved royal supremacy while selectively establishing representative mechanisms. However, the Constitution recognised Islam as the basis of the state and retained the Loya Jirga as a ceremonial legislative body; absolute authority remained centralised in the monarchy. The provincial administration was placed under appointed governors, the military was centralised, and the judiciary was aligned with the executive (Gregorian, 1969). The 1931 Constitution created a durable yet highly centralised order that continued throughout the lengthy reign of Zahir Shah (1933-1973); however, Zahir Shah replaced it with the 1964 Constitution. This Constitution is often regarded as Afghanistan's most liberal moment, though it preserved the unitary structure of governance. While the charter outlined the powers, created a bicameral parliament, and confirmed that the monarch was subject to constitutional limits, the state still maintained a vertically integrated, bureaucratically structured, centralised system. Provincial councils served in a consultative role rather than exercising independence, with financial authority centralised in Kabul. The paradox of liberalisation without decentralisation created a fragile monarchy unable to bridge increasing ideological and regional divides (Rubin, 2002).

The centralisation struggles again increased following Mohammad Daoud Khan's 1973 coup, which abolished the monarchy and installed a republican government. Daoud abrogated his cousin Zahir Shah's 1964 Constitution and promulgated his own in 1977, but he continued to grant significant authority to the president, shifting from royal absolutism to republican authoritarianism (Shahrani, 1986). Also, the PDPA's rise to power in 1978 and the Soviet intervention in 1979 further solidified centralisation. The PDPA's early decrees on land, education, and religion sought to reshape society starting in Kabul, thereby distancing itself from traditional sources of power (Hyman, 2002; Rubin, 2002). However, the 1987 Constitution, drafted under Najibullah, included brief references to federalism and decentralisation; these were mainly symbolic. In practice, power remained in the hands of the executive branch, supported through Soviet backing and coercive measures (Giustozzi, 2011; Hyman, 2002). The collapse of the PDPA regime in 1992 marked the start of a period of state disintegration, during which formal centralisation was supplanted by de facto regionalism. The Mujahideen lacked a unified constitution; instead, their governance fragmented along ethnic and factional lines. While there were attempts at decentralisation, political power remained concentrated mainly, with each faction claiming to be the sole legitimate authority and the genuine representative of the national authority. During the Taliban regime (1996–2001), a highly centralised system was reinstated, emphasising the authority of the Amir al-Muʾminin and the Kandahar shura. They rigorously curtailed local autonomy and substituted administrative processes for religious doctrines (Abbas, 2014; Rashid, 2010).

The most recent constitution, drafted with international assistance in 2004, became Afghanistan's eighth Constitution. Assumed to enhance cohesion and efficient administration, it established a strongly presidential and centralised system in which the president has extensive authority to appoint provincial governors, judges, and other key officials (M. J. Hakimi, 2021; Suhrke, 2011). This Constitution was assumed to serve as a basis for "good governance" and local empowerment; however, in practice, it strengthened central control and diminished local-level autonomy and accountability. The subnational entities had limited fiscal or political independence, indicating Afghan elites' preference for centralised authority and donors' interest in having a consistent single partner in state-building efforts (Mukhopadhyay, 2014; Suhrke, 2011). These issues ultimately limited the Republic's capacity to handle social fragmentation and insurgent advancement (SIGAR, 2023; Suhrke, 2011).

Historically, the centralisation of the Afghan constitution has been a significant continuity. Each constitutional episode, from Amanullah's modernism to the post-2001

Republic, reaffirmed the idea that state survival depended on a strong central authority; however, all eight highly centralised Afghan constitutions led to the collapse of their states. These so-called national documents often overlook the complexity of Afghanistan's sociopolitical landscape, thereby widening the gap by granting the central government excessive power. Thus, the outcome was a centralised yet fragile Republic; despite substantial foreign support, it could not effectively balance unity, diversity, and local governance, leading to the collapse of the Republic in 2021.

4.3 Background of the Constitutional Design of 2004

The constitution establishes a nation's fundamental principles, such as organising, justifying, and limiting power. In democracies, it embodies the people's choice to entrust sovereignty to political institutions and includes mechanisms of accountability (San, 2011). Because human ambition and self-interest continue to threaten liberty and stability, the legitimacy of the constitution depends not only on sources of power but also on constraints imposed on political actors (Roznai, 2021). Thus, the constitution needs to incorporate transparent safeguards to prevent institutional capture and the misuse of power by elites (Madison, 1788). Similarly, the 2004 Afghan constitution was created through the process started by the Bonn Agreement in December 2001. This agreement scheduled a transitional government and a procedure for drafting a new constitution (Rubin, 2004). The drafting members involved UN advisors, Afghan technocrats, members of the Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan, and ethnic leaders from the Northern Alliance. In 2003, the Constitution Drafting Commission delivered the final draft to the President's office. While the Commission initially proposed a parliamentary system; however, it was eventually replaced by a strong presidential system, which the Loya Jirga approved. This shift is emphasised in studies of Afghan constitutional development (Cheibub et al., 2014). While the final version of the constitution was assumed to promote national unity and ensure administrative consistency, in practice, its centralised presidential system expanded executive authority and restricted provincial autonomy (Rubin, 2004). This constitution led to the state's peripheral alienation and reduced legitimacy, particularly in the face of insurgent threats.

The Bonn Conference of December 2001 aimed to stabilise Afghanistan by restoring a central authority in Kabul (United States Institute of Peace, 2013). It outlined a framework for interim and transitional administrations and required the drafting of a new constitution based

on a strong presidential model (Rubin, 2004; J. A. Thier, 2003). Between 2002 and 2004, the United Nations supported the Afghan-led Constitutional Commission and organised the Emergency and Constitutional Loya Jirgas, which led to the creation and ratification of the 2004 constitution; however, this process was heavily influenced by leading political elites, particularly Pashtun figures such as Hamid Karzai, as well as international stakeholders closely associated with the United States. This coalition supported a centralised presidential system aimed at guaranteeing stability and aligning with the externally driven state-building agenda (Rubin, 2004; Suhrke, 2011; J. A. Thier, 2003). However, regional leaders such as General Abdul Rashid Dostum and other non-Pashtun figures supported decentralisation or a federal system, asserting that excessive power was centralised in Kabul, thereby reducing local autonomy (Tarzi, 2003). Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. special envoy and a Pashtun technocrat himself, was an influential figure in post-2001 state reconstruction, and allegedly pressured northern leaders to accept centralisation, even resorting to coercive measures against Dostum's faction (Whitlock, 2021). Besides, Marshal Mohammad Qasim Fahim, a Northern Alliance commander, allied with Hamid Karzai and was appointed Vice President of the transitional administration. This appointment symbolised the co-optation of non-Pashtun elites into a predominantly centralised political order (Sieff & Salahuddin, 2014; J. A. Thier, 2003).

Multiple aspects contributed to the limited observable resistance to this highly centralised constitutional framework. First, the United States preferred to work with a single, robust central government and a reliable president (Rubin, 2004). Besides, many elites, particularly from the influential Pashtun base, supported centralisation efforts to preserve their historic political dominance in Kabul (J. A. Thier, 2003). Also, rivalries within factions of the former Northern Alliance, particularly among Tajik-led groups, impeded the formation of a unified opposition to the constitution (Farr, 2022). Finally, both domestic and international actors prioritised civil and human rights guarantees over the creation of complex mechanisms for ethnic power-sharing or a federal and decentralised structure (J. A. Thier, 2003). As a result, the new constitution appeared to be democratic yet centralised most power in the presidency, thereby influencing Afghanistan's governance post-2001.

The 2004 constitution ensured equal rights for all citizens (Constitution of Afghanistan, 2004, Article 22); however, it did not establish official ethnic quotas (Adeney, 2008). In practice, political influence was informally distributed among different ethnic groups, particularly Pashtun elites. Pashtun elites occupied the presidency, whereas Tajik or Hazara leaders often served as vice presidents, and the same ethnic hierarchy was reflected in other

high-ranking ministerial and bureaucratic positions (Authoritarian analyses emphasise this trend). Appointments and recruitments in state institutions relied on patronage and rent-seeker networks rooted in tribal or ethnic ties rather than on meritocracy (Giustozzi, 2012; Goodhand, 2004; SIGAR, 2017b). Critics caution that, while a robust presidential system, which concentrates too much power in a single office, is a common problem in transitional regimes, these regimes severely suffer from a lack of a strong accountability mechanism (Duryea, 2022). Similarly, the president had firm control over the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. He possessed broad powers to appoint ministers, provincial and district officials, and leaders of central state institutions (Constitution of Afghanistan, 2004, Article 60). Also, international actors, notably the U.S., provided support to the system to promote better coordination and reduce warlord influence. Hence, the presidency quickly became the primary prize in the post-2001 Afghan state-building process. Pashtun elites viewed power-sharing mainly as a matter of majority-minority relations, treating Pashtuns as the dominant national group and other ethnicities as secondary stakeholders (Poya, 2025). Besides, longstanding divisions among non-Pashtun factions, particularly within the former Northern Alliance, led some Tajik-led groups to favour a Pashtun presidential candidate to prevent the co-ethnic rival faction's strengthening. Pashtun elites, whether associated with the government or insurgents, created a challenging political environment for ordinary Pashtuns, who faced pressure from multiple groups. The above factors, along with weak institutions and limited ethnic inclusion, contributed to recurring allegations of electoral fraud in presidential elections from 2004 to 2019 (Callen & Long, 2015; Chua, 2023; Cookman, 2020).

Finally, as it is common in many post-conflict state-building efforts, Afghan constitutionalism combined imported democratic frameworks with longstanding local traditions (Duryea, 2022). For example, the 2004 Constitution established the Loya Jirga as the supreme representative body responsible for making decisions regarding sovereignty, constitutional amendments, and presidential impeachment (Constitution of Afghanistan, 2004, Articles 110–115). In practice, Afghanistan has never met the constitutional requirements for convening a Loya Jirga, particularly with respect to the impeachment of the president. Despite criticism of the opaque delegate selection process, the Republic often used consultative or extra-constitutional Loya Jirgas, which generally supported the executive's ambitions to bypass accountability (Freedom House, 2003; Kane, 2019; S. Smith, 2019). In conclusion, the 2004 Constitution replicated Afghanistan's historical MMG political system in a democratic guise. However, developed with international advice, the domestic elite influenced it and

continued to maintain a centralised, exclusionary governance structure within a contemporary legal system as a safety cover. The vast authority granted in the presidency, coupled with the association of national unity with Pashtun dominance, became a fundamental part of the system. This significantly constrained reforms and reinforced a dictatorial form of governance, resulting in a state that appeared democratic but, in practice, was reluctant to engage in self-correction and reform, and, in particular, to hold presidents accountable for their counterinsurgency strategies against the Taliban, over two decades.

4.4 Ambivalent Presidents and Selective Governance

The Constitution of 2004 vested considerable power in the presidency, thereby enabling subsequent leaders, Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, to influence state institutions in accordance with their narrow, ethnically based political agendas. This hyper-centralised framework effectively incorporated political reluctance into the backbone of institutional structures of the Republic. Both leaders wielded their authority effectively to prioritise allied loyal networks, to limit coercive operations in Pashtun-majority areas, and to marginalise non-Pashtun commanders, thereby turning fraternal rhetoric into concrete organisational practices (Constitution of Afghanistan, 2004; Hussaini, 2022; Leake, 2023; A. J. Thier, 2020). Therefore, the 2004 Constitution enabled the president to take a risky political gamble with minimal power checks or balance and the least accountability, which not only bypassed the international community's counterinsurgency expectations but also made them support the president's double strategies not to suppress but to strengthen the insurgency through foreign aid, in the hope that the Taliban would exchange their loyalty instead; however, they did not do so – only an ambivalent Afghan president could have adopted such a reluctant strategy.

Initially, the Karzai cabinet was formed as a coalition at the 2001 Bonn Conference, which included many Northern Alliance members, mostly Tajiks, who held important positions such as defence and intelligence. Soon, Karzai replaced many of them with loyal Pashtuns, especially from the Popalzai Durrani network. Although these changes were presented as a compromise among different groups, they actually shifted power to favour Pashtun dominance (Jackson, 2015; Katzman, 2014; Sharan, 2011). Also, Karzai halted aggressive military actions in the southern Pashtun provinces, citing the need to promote reconciliation and protect civilians. His administration encountered objections for interfering in judicial and detention procedures – most notably the politically sensitive release of Taliban detainees from Bagram

Prison in 2013-2014, which U.S. and Afghan analysts saw as an attempt to appease southern constituencies (AAN, 2014; Voice of America, 2013; Woolf, 2014). Similarly, Muhammad Hanif Atmar, the former Minister of the Interior and National Security Advisor under both Karzai and Ghani, reportedly travelled to Pakistan ten times to negotiate the release of Mullah Baradar, a senior Taliban leader, from a Pakistani jail, and finally Karzai and Atmar successfully freed Mullah Baradar (afintl, 2025). He allegedly maintained a relationship and had frequent contact with the Taliban; however, both presidents completely shielded him from any accountability. These examples show how presidential power is often used selectively, favouring sympathy over coercion.

Similarly, Ghani intensified this dynamic despite his technocratic image. He further monopolised decision-making procedures by personally overseeing promotions, procurement, and security appointments (Malkasian, 2021; SIGAR, 2017b, p. 2023, 2023). Recurring reshuffles and ethnic favouritism damaged cohesion within the Afghan national security forces, thereby intensifying mistrust among non-Pashtun officers (Malkasian, 2021; SIGAR, 2023). He frequently sidelined the U.S.-trained military officers and replaced them with his loyalists (SIGAR, 2021). By integrating fraternity into the logic of statecraft, executive centralisation converted rhetorical constraints into operational selectivity, defending co-ethnic constituencies while risking the stability of peripheral areas (AAN, 2021; Schroden, 2022; SIGAR, 2022c). For example, certain provinces such as Faryab and Bamiyan, which have historically been non-Pashtun strongholds, received biased state protection, whereas Kabul and the southern Pashtun regions were prioritised (SIGAR, 2021). These measures created the impression that the government favoured ethnic loyalty over national security. In conclusion, under both leaders, the Republic served as an institutional filter that carefully approved the use of coercion and, at times, expressed sympathy for insurgents; so, centralisation worked as the second pillar of the reluctance triad, effectively facilitating selective enforcement in Afghanistan's governance between 2001 and 2021.

4.5 Regime Reluctance and Institutional Centralisation

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan functioned as a presidential system under the 2004 Constitution, which remained in effect until its collapse in August 2021. It succeeded the interim and transitional administrations created under the 2001 Bonn Agreement, which had outlined Afghanistan's post-Taliban state-building roadmap (Rubin, 2004; J. A. Thier, 2003).

The 2004 Constitution defined three principal branches of government, including the executive, legislative, and judicial, and also recognised subnational entities, such as provincial, district, and village councils (Constitution of Afghanistan, 2004). Similarly, under the constitution, the president would serve as head of state, head of government, and commander-in-chief of the armed forces, thereby centralising political and security authority in a single office (Constitution of Afghanistan, 2004, Articles 60–64). The president was elected by direct popular vote to serve a five-year term, with a maximum of two consecutive terms. Each presidential ticket featured two vice presidents, indicating an informal tradition that supported the ethnic balance inherent in post-2001 power-sharing agreements (Adeney, 2008; Barfield, 2022). The president had the authority to appoint cabinet ministers, provincial governors, military commanders, and senior officials; however, all appointments required parliamentary approval. Nevertheless, in practice, such oversight was weak, and executive discretion often prevailed. Hence, while the framework resembled democratic presidential systems, it remained highly centralised, with the presidency as the primary centre of power (Hussaini, 2022).

Meanwhile, parliamentary oversight was generally designed to avoid directly challenging presidents. For example, there were examples of limits to legislative oversight and of the president overcoming parliamentary opposition by appealing to the Supreme Court. Furthermore, the large number of the cabinet members served without parliamentary approval. There was a fragmentation in the lower chamber. These examples will be examined in greater detail later. In practice, the Islamic of Republic of Afghanistan often functioned as a dictatorship under the guise of a democratic regime. The Parliament of Afghanistan, also known as the National Assembly or the “Melli Shura,” was a bicameral legislature comprising the Wolesi Jirga (House of the People) and the Meshrano Jirga (House of Elders). The Wolesi Jirga consisted of 249 representatives who were elected under the single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system, a method designed to foster individual accountability; however, in practice, it produced fragmented representation and impeded the development of stable political parties. Similarly, the Meshrano Jirga consisted of 102 members. The President appointed one-third, provincial councils elected one-third, and district councils elected the remaining one-third in all 34 provinces. Because district council elections never took place, most of these seats were filled by presidential appointment, which further increased executive control (Suhrke, 2011). While the Meshrano Jirga had constitutional review and consultation powers, it rarely utilised its independent authority and usually supported executive preferences (Hussaini, 2022). Moreover, the judiciary of the Republic was organised into the Supreme Court (Stera

Mahkama), Courts of Appeal, and Primary Courts, as defined by Article 116 of the Constitution. The Supreme Court was the highest judicial authority. It consisted of nine justices appointed by the President and approved by the Wolesi Jirga to serve a non-renewable ten-year term, as limited by Article 117. The Constitution guaranteed judicial independence; however, executive interference, corruption, and patronage often eroded the integrity of judicial appointments and the courts' impartiality.

Similarly, the 2004 Constitution (Article 69) authorised the Wolesi Jirga to impeach the president on charges of treason or other severe legal violations; however, this mechanism has never resulted in the removal of a president. The legislature sometimes resorts to or threatens impeachment as a political tactic to show disapproval of executive dominance. Likewise, in 2011, several members of Parliament accused Hamid Karzai of contravening constitutional provisions and deliberated on initiating impeachment proceedings amid disagreements over his establishment of a special election tribunal and his intervention in parliamentary affairs (Tait, 2011; Worden, 2011). However, the initiative was stopped before achieving the required two-thirds majority or convening a Loya Jirga. This exposed both the institution's fragility and the legislature's political dependence on the presidency (Hamidi, 2015). Likewise, during Ghani's tenure, a comparable incident occurred in 2019, when the Wolesi Jirga publicly warned that it would consider initiating impeachment proceedings against Ghani if he did not submit a full cabinet by the parliamentary deadline (TOLOnews, 2019b). However, because Ghani partially introduced cabinet candidates, the Wolesi Jirga dismissed the warning, implying that impeachment functions more as a rhetorical bargaining tool than a genuine check on executive power. These abortive efforts highlight the asymmetric relationship between the legislature and the presidency, in which constitutional accountability mechanisms existed primarily in form rather than in effect (Timory, 2019; A. Wilder, 2019).

Therefore, the hyper-centralised constitutional structure of the Republic established a "reluctant regime" that prioritised caution and elite compromises over bold reforms. Power and legitimacy primarily resided with the presidency, which rested on elite consensus, whereas other institutions played minimal roles as counterweights. Both Karzai and Ghani governed through unstable coalitions that prioritised the distribution of favours over the development of robust institutions (Goodhand & Hakimi, 2014; SIGAR, 2022c). For example, Ghani's administration was characterised by a closely knit circle of loyalists and ineffective coalition-building, so patronage replaced genuine participation, thereby making the presidency the principal source and boundary of political influence and authority (SIGAR, 2021). Since the

parliament, judiciary, and provincial offices predominantly depended on executive patronage, they lost their independence in exchange for rent-based loyalty. Consequently, Afghanistan exhibited the facade structure of a republican democracy but functioned as a reluctant regime, unwilling to move forward. Likewise, the following subsections explain the main features of this system, including the concentration of authority in the presidency and the constrained autonomy of other governmental bodies, and illustrate how the so-called democratic regime struggled to enact substantive reforms and frequently failed to tackle essential national challenges, such as the Taliban insurgency.

4.5.1 Presidential Dominance and Weak Constraints

In Afghanistan's centralised political system, the president holds the highest authority, concurrently serving as head of state and a symbol of national unity (Constitution of Afghanistan, 2004, Article 60). According to Articles 60-61, the president was elected by popular vote to a five-year term, renewable once, and was accompanied by two vice presidents. This office wielded significant executive, legislative, and judicial powers, causing an institutional imbalance that undermined the separation of powers (Rubin, 2004; Suhrke, 2011; J. A. Thier, 2003). Similarly, Article 64 delineates the broad authorities vested in the presidency, encompassing commanding the armed forces, declaring war and peace, imposing states of emergency, and establishing or dissolving state agencies. Therefore, the significant authority vested in the president allows them to bypass accountability and pursue their narrow interests with minimal checks and balances (Constitution of Afghanistan, 2004).

Likewise, the president maintained full authority to appoint senior military and civilian officials at all administrative levels, with only nominal approval from the parliament (Constitution of Afghanistan, 2004, Articles 64 & 92). This authority enabled the president to expand patronage networks to secure loyalty. For example, Ghani frequently rotated senior security leaders and appointed his loyalists, often on the basis of political allegiance and ethnicity rather than merit or competence, like the 2018 Inherent Law of Officers, which enabled Ghani to retire hundreds of senior generals, many of whom were non-Pashtuns, and to replace them with younger officers perceived as politically and ethnically loyal. This strategy resulted in a politicised command structure and revealed ethnically driven patterns of promotion (SIGAR, 2023). When the Taliban intensified their conflict in 2021, instead of implementing substantial changes to the security tactics, he repeatedly replaced ministers, corps commanders, and district police chiefs (SIGAR, 2023). These rapid changes caused

confusion and reduced morale among military personnel. Only nearly half of the district police chiefs and nearly all corps commanders were replaced between March and June 2021, creating leadership vacuums and reducing morale (Clark, 2021). Similarly, U.S.-trained military officers were sidelined or constrained as Ghani became increasingly suspicious of their ties to Washington. These practices led to the dismissal of commanders who had received modern counterinsurgency training (SIGAR, 2023). As a result, Ghani, due to his unchecked power, effectively eroded the national army's capabilities against the Taliban's advancement.

Furthermore, the Constitution established a tripartite system of government; however, both the legislature and the judiciary operated largely under executive influence. Articles 64, 79, and 94 authorise the president to propose legislation, issue legislative decrees, and refer legislation back to parliament for reconsideration, thereby blurring the separation of powers. Likewise, Article 116 guaranteed judicial independence, but Articles 117, 132, and 133 grant the president significant authority over judicial appointments and administration, making the judiciary vulnerable to political influence (Hussaini, 2022). Furthermore, the absence of a definitive constitutional arbiter, such as a specialised constitutional court or interpretive body, led to frequent disagreements among the branches. Therefore, this tension bolstered executive power and, as scholars have noted, enabled the presidency to bypass legislative and judicial checks, thereby eroding the rule of law (M. J. Hakimi, 2021; Hussaini, 2022).

The Constitution of 2004 apparently endorsed the separation of powers among the three branches of government; however, political realities significantly constrained its effectiveness. Oversight by the National Assembly was hindered by the lack of political parties and further complicated by ongoing internal divisions stemming from the single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system, which inhibited coalition formation (Coburn & Larson, 2014; Reilly & Nordlund, 2008). In addition, the judiciary was weakened by design flaws that undermined its independence. The president controlled judicial appointments, budgets, and promotions. Furthermore, the Supreme Court's authority to review the constitutionality of laws was limited (M. J. Hakimi, 2021; Hussaini, 2022). According to the Constitution, constitutional review could only be initiated by the government or the courts. Hence, opposition leaders, legislators, and civil society organisations lacked the legal standing to challenge executive overreach (Jayakody, 2015). As a result, this imbalance substantially increased the presidency's dominance. For example, in Karzai's second term, six out of twenty-five ministers remained in office despite a parliamentary vote of no confidence rejection. Under Ghani, more than half of the cabinet served without parliamentary approval (Jayakody, 2015; SIGAR, 2021).

In addition to the above, the impeachment process for the President was exceptionally constrained, as Article 69 requires that at least one-third of the Wolesi Jirga initiate the proceedings. Subsequently, these proceedings require the support of a two-thirds majority to be forwarded to the Loya Jirga, the ultimate decision-making body, as outlined in Article 111; however, this lengthy and challenging procedure actually transferred the authority to impeach from elected representatives to a semi-unauthorised traditional assembly (Constitution of Afghanistan, 2004; J. A. Thier, 2003). Besides, the President alone held the power to summon, suspend, or dissolve the Loya Jirga. In addition, the Loya Jirga, a traditionally tribal assembly, was legally elevated above the legislature as "the highest manifestation of the will of the people" (Article 110). However, it symbolised participatory legitimacy; in practice, it primarily served as an instrument of executive convenience (S. Smith, 2019; Suhrke, 2011), as assessments ranked the Afghan presidency among the strongest in Asia in terms of formal constitutional powers (Cheibub et al., 2014). The President had veto power over legislation, which could be overridden only by a two-thirds majority in the Wolesi Jirga (Article 94). In addition, he could issue legislative decrees during parliamentary recesses (Article 79), which took effect immediately and were often unchallenged. These provisions obscured the distinction between executive and legislative powers, thereby reinforcing presidential authority and diminishing the principle of separation of powers (M. J. Hakimi, 2021; SIGAR, 2021). Likewise, other constitutional provisions, such as the President's authority to initiate referenda on important national issues (Article 65) and the capacity to execute the previous year's budget in the absence of approval of a new one by the Wolesi Jirga within a month (Article 98), have further exacerbated Afghanistan's executive imbalance (Constitution of Afghanistan, 2004; J. A. Thier, 2003). Although Article 69 states that the President is "responsible to the nation and parliament," this responsibility is symbolic mainly due to weak enforcement mechanisms (M. J. Hakimi, 2021). Given the presence of weak opposition parties, an independent judiciary, and limited impeachment procedures, no institution was capable of effectively constraining presidential, king-like authority (Adeney, 2008; Coburn & Larson, 2014).

In conclusion, Afghanistan's constitutional framework centralised authority within the office of the presidency, while providing merely a symbolic institutional check-and-balance requirement. In a similar vein, it placed an unelected Loya Jirga above the elected parliament, thereby diminishing parliamentary sovereignty and enhancing executive power (S. Smith, 2019; J. A. Thier, 2003). Hence, the incorporation of extensive executive power, weak legislative oversight, limited judicial independence, and the lack of an effective accountability

mechanism entrenched a reluctant regime, one where formal institutions existed but were either unable or unwilling to hold the executive to account (Adeney, 2008; Suhrke, 2011). So, this situation revived the personalised rule that has historically characterised Afghan governance, thereby rendering the Republic structurally vulnerable to crises and eventual collapse.

4.5.2 Institutional Performance and Critique

In Afghanistan's political landscape after 2001, the interaction of ethnic nationalism, the extensive authority granted to the presidency in the 2004 Constitution, and continued U.S. influence on the selection of political elites was evident (SIGAR, 2021; J. A. Thier, 2003). Collectively, these forces produced a system that was deficient in transparency, accountability, and institutional balance, in which formal checks on the executive were predominantly symbolic (Suhrke, 2011). In this context, corruption became deeply rooted, and opposition forces, both within parliament and civil society, were too divided to mount an effective challenge to presidential authority (Coburn & Larson, 2014). Although the monopoly of violence formally shifted from local actors to the state, the Republic failed to gain legitimacy from its institutional functions; instead, it relied on personalised loyalty networks (Barfield, 2022; Goodhand & Sedra, 2009; SIGAR, 2021).

Hamid Karzai, drawing on his Durrani-Pashtun background, sought to maintain support among Pashtun tribes by emphasising his dynastic legitimacy and sidelining competing ethnic leaders (Rubin, 2013; Suhrke, 2011). His administration distributed key offices based on ethnic patronage and implemented selective Taliban reintegration efforts to reinforce Pashtun dominance in the state (Goodhand et al., 2021; SIGAR, 2021). Likewise, Ashraf Ghani also heightened ethnic patronage within the Afghan Republic. Although he promoted meritocracy and reform, Ghani prioritised making sure Pashtun domination in vital institutions. He surrounded himself with diaspora technocrats and dual nationals whom he trusted personally and considered politically reliable (Ayoobi, 2018; Bezhan, 2021). For instance, his roles in the General Directorate of Administrative Affairs, the presidential secretariat responsible for coordinating the high-level bureaucracy, demonstrated a focus on appointing Pashtun officials rather than promoting ethnic diversity and meritocracy (Mukhopadhyay, 2014; SIGAR, 2021). Furthermore, both Karzai and Ghani used their appointive powers to build loyalty networks, suppress opposition, and conflate criticism with disloyalty, thereby creating political conformity within the state apparatus (HRW, 2019; Suhrke, 2011).

The Constitution also enabled the imbalance and concentration of power; Articles 60 and 64 of the 2004 Constitution granted the president wide-ranging powers to appoint and dismiss civilian, military, and judicial officials, thereby effectively undermining the system of checks and balances (Constitution of Afghanistan, 2004; A. J. Thier, 2020). However, Articles 91 and 92 were intended to confer on the Wolesi Jirga the authority to question ministers and to pass votes of no confidence; the lack of enforcement mechanisms rendered these provisions largely symbolic (Coburn & Larson, 2014). The dispute between Karzai and the Wolesi Jirga over the failed attempt to impeach Foreign Minister Dr Rangin Dadfar Spanta in 2007 is a good example of this power imbalance. When parliament voted to dismiss Spanta for his handling of Afghan deportations from Iran, Karzai referred the case to the Supreme Court, which swiftly ruled in his favour. Parliament's challenge proved ineffective; consequently, Spanta remained in office, and the incident deterred further legislative opposition (M. J. Hakimi, 2021).

This style of authoritarian leadership, which disguised itself as a democracy, continued throughout Ashraf Ghani's tenure, as he frequently bypassed parliament. By 2020, nearly 80 per cent of his cabinet had served without a vote of confidence, and in several cases, nominees, even after being rejected, retained their posts (SIGAR, 2021; TOLOnews, 2020e). Karzai and Ghani frequently referred controversial legislation to the Supreme Court whenever it conflicted with the executive branch's interests. The Court always favoured the presidency by nullifying parliamentary measures, including the media law and the Constitutional Oversight Commission, thereby safeguarding the executive branch from legislative oversight (M. J. Hakimi, 2021). Moreover, Article 79 of the Constitution strengthened presidential authority by authorising the issuance of legislative decrees during parliamentary recess. These decrees were expected to be reviewed within 30 days of the parliament's return; however, presidents frequently postponed their submission, thereby allowing them to take effect by default (Hussaini, 2022; SIGAR, 2021; A. J. Thier, 2020). In addition, after the 2018 parliamentary elections, marred by violence, widespread fraud, and allegations of presidential misconduct, the legislature's credibility further diminished, while the event increased the president's power. Former officials of the Independent Election Commission later claimed that the Presidential Palace pressured the electoral body to manipulate the results and fulfil "illegal demands," such as premature certification of preferred candidates (Ariana News, 2019; TOLOnews, 2019a).

Even with formal oversight mechanisms in place, they could often be bypassed. Likewise, Article 94 gave the parliament the authority to override a presidential veto with a two-thirds majority; however, given the parliamentary structure, this requirement was nearly

impossible to meet, indicating that legislative checks were largely symbolic. In 2020, the Wolesi Jirga rejected Ghani's "Dastarkhan-e-Milli" (National Tablecloth) welfare programme, a $280 million project funded by the World Bank, citing worries about possible corruption and inadequate oversight. Still, the government proceeded with implementation, exemplifying the ineffectiveness of parliamentary opposition (TOLOnews, 2020d). As previously noted, the impeachment provisions delineated in Article 69 were equally ineffective. It authorised the removal of a president for treason or crimes against humanity; however, the requirement of securing a two-thirds majority in Parliament, followed by approval from the Loya Jirga, rendered accountability virtually unattainable. Also, considering the undemocratic structure of the Jirga and the president's control over convening it, no president has ever undergone genuine impeachment proceedings (M. J. Hakimi, 2021; S. Smith, 2019; A. J. Thier, 2020).

Additionally, an intentionally divisive electoral system exacerbated existing institutional flaws. In 2004, Karzai's administration chose the single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system for parliamentary elections, disregarding UN and expert recommendations favouring proportional representation (Reilly & Nordlund, 2008; J. A. Thier, 2003; A. R. Wilder, 2005). The SNTV approach produced fragmented, candidate-centred politics, hindering the development of unified political parties. As a result, the parliament primarily consisted of independent candidates with narrow constituencies and limited capacity to check executive authority (Coburn & Larson, 2014), who instead advanced rent-seeking, clientelism, and legislative bribery, thereby strengthening presidential dominance (SIGAR, 2016b, 2021). Furthermore, foreign intervention exacerbated this imbalance. However, the Presidents claimed constitutional democratic legitimacy; both Karzai and Ghani largely depended on U.S. support to keep hold of their political power. Washington's focus on stability and centralised leadership often overlooked evidence of electoral fraud, as shown in the disputed presidential elections of 2004, 2009, 2014, and 2019, all of which received support from international partners, mainly the White House (Coburn & Larson, 2014; SIGAR, 2021, 2022c). This U.S. support for the widespread election fraud outcomes significantly eroded confidence in domestic institutions and hindered the development of a strong internal opposition.

In conclusion, the intersection of ethnic nationalism, unchecked presidential authority, and foreign intervention created a political system that was less like a democratic regime and more similar to a personal monarchy (Barfield, 2022; Suhrke, 2011). The 2004 Constitution, rather than checking executive authority, endorsed and institutionalised it, thereby conferring broad powers on presidents under the guise of democratic legitimacy (M. J. Hakimi, 2021; A.

J. Thier, 2020). Afghan leaders governed with little accountability, depending on decree powers, subordinate courts, and ineffective parliamentary oversight (SIGAR, 2021). This created a hesitant regime characterised by deep-rooted resistance to power-sharing or accountability, turning political rivalry into a system centred on patronage and dependence. Therefore, Afghanistan's political institutions evolved into self-perpetuating entities that opposed reforms yet contributed to the decline of the Republic they were meant to uphold.

4.5.3 The Loya Jirga as an Instrument Against Accountability

The term "Jirga", derived from Pashto, meaning "assembly", is a critical element of Pashtun tribal culture, traditionally used to resolve disputes and maintain communal order under Pashtunwali (Barfield, 2010; Gregorian, 1969). The prefix "Loya," meaning "grand," refers to the Loya Jirga, or "Grand Assembly," a body traditionally made up of influential tribal elders and clerics, mainly from Pashtun communities (S. Smith, 2019). For over two centuries of monarchy, Afghan rulers convened Loya Jirgas to consolidate authority or legitimise key political decisions (Rubin, 2002). Its first modern political function emerged under King Amanullah Khan in 1919, when the assembly endorsed his policy of independence and an early reform agenda (Barfield, 2010; Gregorian, 1969). Similarly, the 2002 Emergency Loya Jirga ratified Hamid Karzai as head of the Transitional Administration, while the 2003-04 Constitutional Loya Jirga officially adopted the new constitution (Suhrke, 2011; J. A. Thier, 2003). Loya Jirgas played an essential role in the post-2001 Republic, such as the release of 5,000 Taliban detainees under Ghani; however, can Loya Jirgas contribute to democracy? Can it operate as a democratic institution alongside others, such as Parliament? Why does the U.S. not have a Loya Jirga, even though it supported its use for state-building in Afghanistan?

Article 110 of the Constitution recognises the Loya Jirga as "the highest manifestation of the will of the people of Afghanistan." Likewise, Article 111 specifies the assembly's duties in three important areas: national sovereignty or independence, constitutional amendments, and presidential impeachment, as outlined in Article 69. Generally, the president may be impeached for treason or other serious crimes; however, the procedural requirements to initiate impeachment by one-third of the Wolesi Jirga, requiring approval by two-thirds, and confirmation through a two-thirds vote of the Loya Jirga, render holding the president accountable exceedingly difficult, in addition to Article 64(7) conferring on the president the authority to convene or postpone the Loya Jirga in all cases except impeachment, thereby granting the executive branch procedural oversight over the body designed to limit its own

powers (J. A. Thier, 2003). In practice, the president exercised considerable authority over the agenda, logistics, and timing, possessing the prerogative to convene, postpone, or steer proceedings to serve political interests (Suhrke, 2011; J. A. Thier, 2003).

The central government invites members of the National Assembly, chairpersons of provincial and district councils, cabinet ministers, the Chief Justice, and members of the Supreme Court, though they attend without voting rights (Constitution of Afghanistan, 2004; J. A. Thier, 2003). Additionally, the central authorities invite other participants from across the country, whom organisers and provincial governors often select or screen. Besides, central organisers cover participants' travel, accommodation, and allowances; these conditions foster dependency and conformity (S. Smith, 2019). However, women's representation remains insufficient, and political parties exert little influence, thereby diminishing the assembly's capacity for independent debate. Hence, the Loya Jirga, seen as a symbol of national unity, still has a composition and selection process that remains ambiguous. For example, the 2002 Emergency Loya Jirga, which endorsed Hamid Karzai as the interim leader, was conducted through elite negotiations rather than public participation (Suhrke, 2011). These extensive presidential powers over convening the Loya Jirga consistently reinforce the executive branch's dominance within the political system. Historically, Afghan rulers have used Loya Jirgas to legitimise their narrow political interests, bypass laws or mobilisation, rather than submit to genuine oversight (S. Smith, 2019; Suhrke, 2011).

The Loya Jirga has historically represented tribal authority more than democratic governance. Afghan leaders have frequently aligned their narrow interests with tribal structures, especially in the southern and eastern Pashtun regions, by combining traditional legitimacy with modern state governance (Barfield, 2010; Gregorian, 1969). This institution represents a transition from premodern to constitutional governance, providing a low-cost way for rulers to gain legitimacy. It enables them to sidestep formal institutions and present autocratic decisions as representing national consensus (S. Smith, 2019; Suhrke, 2011). In practice, the Loya Jirga has shown a persistence of ethnonationalism and the predominance of Pashtun tribal political culture within the state (Barfield, 2010; Rubin, 2002). Likewise, as every president has come from the Pashtun elite, the Loya Jirga has shifted from being a means of distributing power to a tool for strengthening it. The Loya Jirgas have helped leaders to circumvent parliamentary procedures, reinterpret constitutional restrictions, and present presidential decrees as demonstrating popular support (S. Smith, 2019). For instance, the 2020 Consultative Loya Jirga on peace, organised by Ashraf Ghani, approved the release of 5,000

Taliban prisoners, some of whom had been charged with seriously committing crimes against humanity or had brutally killed innocent people; however, the Loya Jirga portrayed it as representing "the will of the Afghan people" (Al Jazeera, 2020; TOLOnews, 2020b).

Overall, Afghan rulers have traditionally depicted the Loya Jirga as a manifestation of the popular will; however, the assembly has infrequently functioned as a legitimate forum for accountability. Throughout contemporary Afghan history, the Loya Jirga's outcomes have predominantly reflected executive interests rather than imposing substantive constraints or making the leaders accountable (Barfield, 2010, 2022; Rubin, 2002). However, this pattern persisted even after 2001, when the 2004 Constitution reaffirmed it, characterising the Loya Jirga as the highest expression of the Afghan people's will. Thus, instead of supporting democracy, the Loya Jirga has upheld centralisation, elite dominance, and the bypassing of laws to shield the president's sympathetic approach to the Taliban fighters, thereby giving the appearance of democratic consent to both domestic and international audiences (Barfield, 2022; Suhrke, 2011; A. J. Thier, 2020). In other words, the Loya Jirga helped sustain a hesitant regime that outwardly promoted constitutionalism and participation but, in practice, provided political tools that shielded the leaders from accountability.

4.6 International Reluctance and Afghan Centralisation

After 2001, international involvement in Afghanistan was officially characterised as efforts to build a democratic state and promote peace and stability. Likewise, external actors, including the United States, NATO allies, and multilateral donors, contended that strong centralisation could uphold coherence, facilitate effective aid distribution and oversight, and strengthen governmental authority. This belief shaped the design of the 2004 Constitution, which established a strong presidential system and centralised executive power. Over time, international supporters became increasingly hesitant to hold Afghanistan's presidents accountable for ongoing conflict and governance failures, effectively constraining themselves, within the institutional order they had helped to create. Therefore, foreign aid was predominantly channelled through Kabul, thereby reinforcing executive authority and exemplifying the principle of "stability through centralisation" logic. In practice, however, this concentration approach undermined accountability mechanisms and allowed the presidency and its patronage networks to pursue narrow ethnic and factional interests by leveraging international support effectively (Barfield, 2012; Rubin, 2002; Suhrke, 2011).

During the Bonn process, the United States assumed a leading role in helping to shape Afghanistan's political future following the 2001 intervention. While the United Nations formally mediated the negotiations, Washington's primary emphasis on counterterrorism and administrative efficiency resulted in a preference for a robust, centralised executive capable of facilitating cooperation with international security and aid initiatives (Chesterman, 2004; Suhrke, 2011). This perspective was manifested in the 2004 Constitution, which instituted a robust presidential system and a unitary state framework (Constitution of Afghanistan, 2004). However, the Constitutional Commission and Loya Jirga comprised Afghan delegates; comparative constitutional studies suggest that advisors from the U.S. and the United Nations exercised an influential, albeit indirect, part in leading the process towards a presidential rather than parliamentary model, partly to mitigate the perceived instability linked to coalition governance (J. A. Thier, 2003). Proposals for more decentralised or consociational arrangements, put forward by several Afghan factions, including elements of the Northern Alliance, were ultimately rejected in favour of a centralised framework (Rubin, 2002; Suhrke, 2011). The Bonn Agreement proposed preparing the constitution before elections. This helps establish official legitimacy and sustain administrative stability, rather than emphasising negotiated political participation. Therefore, the international community endorsed a strategy of stability through centralisation as the core of Afghanistan's new Republic, thereby laying the foundation for subsequent challenges to executive authority and institutional stability.

The U.S.-backed Afghan Constitution had a considerable influence on American foreign policy. Washington endeavoured to establish a robust central government to facilitate partnerships in counterinsurgency and development; however, the U.S. soon found itself caught in the very rigid institutional structures it had initially helped to establish. Struggles to bypass or criticise leaders such as Hamid Karzai or Ashraf Ghani, who often resisted specific U.S. demands or prioritised their own peace initiatives, risked destabilising the vital political environment that symbolised the U.S. nation-building efforts in Afghanistan. Analysts noted that, relying on a single sovereign partner, Washington's ability to oppose executive actions that conflicted with U.S. interests was severely limited. As a result, centralised constitutional arrangements developed into mechanisms of diplomatic dependence (Goodhand & Sedra, 2009; Suhrke, 2011; A. J. Thier & Worden, 2017). The concentration of authority within the presidency further reduced international donors' accountability demands, as the executive could assert sovereignty to oppose donor conditions and also used foreign aid as a tool of patronage (SIGAR, 2021, 2022b). Likewise, Afghanistan's aid dependency reinforced

centralisation, with the two main offices of the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund and the Ministry of Finance becoming the key channels for donor resources, providing on-budget funds managed from Kabul (World Bank, 2017). This setup closely linked development funding with the central government's authority. Efforts to enhance fiscal transparency were also linked to provincial development and to central approval, thereby hampering effective decentralisation of budget authority. Ministries often operated within donor-led vertical programmes rather than within locally prioritised frameworks. Provincial councils, mainly advisory and underfunded, had limited political influence, supporting the view that decision-making power was concentrated in Kabul (Boex, 2012; De Leon & Tremaine, 2015; A. J. Thier, 2020).

Furthermore, diplomatic efforts reinforced these administrative practices, as donors associated accessibility with accountability, assuming that direct interactions with the president would improve coordination. Likewise, this interaction conferred external recognition on the executive branch, thereby bolstering its domestic authority (Goodhand & Sedra, 2013; A. J. Thier & Worden, 2017). In addition, donor reluctance to diversify their Afghan counterparts inadvertently conferred legitimacy upon the very executive dominance they sought to reform. At the normative level, many international donors emphasised state cohesion over political pluralism. Community-driven initiatives such as the National Solidarity Programme were operationalised at a micro-developmental scale, with little formal connection to local political structures (Beath et al., 2015). The emphasis was on participation through service delivery rather than on constitutional reform, resulting in a gap between technocratic involvement and political exclusion. Concerns about ethnic fragmentation and the revival of warlord influence hindered donors from getting involved with subnational actors. Consequently, Kabul effectively became the main point and gatekeeper of external legitimacy (Barfield, 2012; Goodhand & Sedra, 2009; SIGAR, 2021). Similarly, security assistance in Afghanistan became more centralised. Training efforts by the U.S. and NATO focused on strengthening national command structures, mainly within the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of the Interior, rather than promoting more independent, community-led security initiative arrangements. Efforts to establish local defence units, such as the Afghan Local Police, faced obstacles due to concerns about human rights abuses and militia accountability (Clark, 2020; HRW, 2015). Hence, by limiting local autonomy, the central government boosted its control over recruitment, logistics, and payroll, which, in return, external allies also increased reliance on the presidential office; however, reports indicated that Afghanistan's security agencies

remained highly centralised and structurally fragile, mirroring the executive-driven nature of the state system (Malkasian, 2021; SIGAR, 2023).

Likewise, by the late 2010s, international actors also contributed to political reluctance. Donor conditions, intended to promote reform, often bolstered presidential power. The Republic, through anti-corruption initiatives, prioritised national institutions over regional entities and constrained the financial autonomy of local councils; however, such measures strengthened the presidency's authority in governance and international relations (Cooper, 2018; SIGAR, 2023). Given that the Afghan state relied on external funding, donor risk assessments often correlated with local opposition to reforms. The idea of "one government, one partner" was intended to improve the state's efficiency but proved to be a significant constraint. The international community's collaboration with a single sovereign authority reduced the likelihood of executive challenges. For the U.S., which helped establish a robust presidential system, this investment made it hesitant to confront Afghan leaders, Karzai and Ghani, about corruption, electoral issues, and political exclusion. The U.S. was reluctant for three reasons. Firstly, the U.S. prioritised maintaining regime stability over implementing institutional reforms. After 2006, as the Taliban insurgency intensified, Washington was concerned that addressing governance issues or corruption might destabilise the coalition or weaken counterinsurgency efforts (Goodhand & Sedra, 2009; SIGAR, 2023; Suhrke, 2011). Secondly, established routines and programs in the U.S. and donor agencies led to greater dependence on the Afghan presidential palace. Major aid programmes were established to operate through the central government. This rendered decentralisation and initiatives to bolster accountability tougher and more expensive (World Bank, 2016). Ultimately, in Washington, there was frequently a pronounced preference for attaining swift, tangible successes rather than implementing enduring institutional reforms (SIGAR, 2021). In addition, it was imperative to preserve the semblance of coherence and a cooperative Afghan partner, as this facilitated the continuation of congressional funding and public backing.

Similarly, during Karzai's tenure, these dynamics led to a pattern of selective tolerance. For example, U.S. officials downplayed some important corruption scandals, including the 2010 Kabul Bank bankruptcy, which involved senior political figures. They also supported controversial electoral outcomes in 2009 and 2014 to help keep the government united (Katzman, 2014; SIGAR, 2016b). In both instances, U.S. involvement often favoured elites over accountability, thereby strengthening presidential power in exchange for stability (A. J. Thier & Worden, 2017). Likewise, during Ghani's tenure, the pattern remained consistent.

Although government officials publicly endorsed governance and anti-corruption initiatives, donor oversight and financial assistance predominantly continued to flow through the presidential office, thereby strengthening executive authority (Brown, 2021; Lockhart, 2014; Murtazashvili, 2022). So, Ghani politicised appointments within the security sector and marginalised political rivals. However, U.S. influence was primarily rhetorical, intended to sustain cooperation during the anticipated withdrawal process (SIGAR, 2023). Consequently, the reluctance of international patrons became an integral aspect of Afghanistan's centralising regime which reinforced executive dominance and ultimately weakened the state's resilience (Goodhand & Sedra, 2009; SIGAR, 2023; Suhrke, 2011; A. J. Thier & Worden, 2017).

4.7 Summary

Afghanistan's Constitution marked a major step in the country's transition to democracy following the 2001 intervention; however, it essentially formalised an existing pattern of executive centralisation within MMG, a pattern common in Afghan politics throughout its modern history. The Constitution established a robust centralised authority and considerable presidential powers. Likewise, scholars such as Barfield (2012) and Thier (2020) argue that the Constitution hindered genuine decentralisation, while Suhrke (2011) suggests that international involvement also contributed to this outcome. The study referred to this as "constitutional centralisation," a process that intentionally fostered multi-layered resistance to decentralising authority, reforming governance, or recognising the country's social diversity.

At the individual level, the presidency exhibited tendencies toward political and selective discretion rather than accountability. Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai exploited extensive constitutional and institutional powers to influence state structures and to support their factional and ethnic allies. During Karzai's leadership, efforts to build multi-ethnic coalitions expanded but mostly stayed dependent on personal patronage, resulting in rent-seeking appointments, amnesties, strategic placements, and security deals. Similarly, Ghani further centralised authority by making appointments and security allocations that favoured loyalists and ethnic allies. Hence, experts cautioned that both presidents manipulated legal authority as a political weapon, exploiting constitutional loopholes to implement biased policies, especially against insurgents (Holdren et al., 2014; Malkasian, 2021; SIGAR, 2023). This practice of leadership illustrates what this study termed "ambivalent leadership," in which

the president wields near-absolute power but applies it selectively with minimal accountability, even as external actors often push for meaningful confrontations with the insurgency.

At the institutional level, the 2004 Constitution produced a significant power imbalance. The international community, along with Afghan elites, supported a centralised, strong governance system designed with only limited decentralisation. The use of the Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) system in the Wolesi Jirga led to legislative fragmentation and impeded the development of cohesive political parties. Parliamentary institutions remained fragile, political parties were predominantly personalised, and the capacity for effective oversight of the presidency was notably constrained. Similarly, the Loya Jirga was presented as the highest manifestation of the people's will; however, in practice, it functioned predominantly as an instrument for the executive branch to circumvent legal statutes and present leaders' biased decisions as the will of the people. By embedding a unitary presidential architecture, the regime institutionalised what I define as "regime reluctance" – a structural resistance to reform, resilient to the accommodation of Afghanistan's social heterogeneity, and, more importantly, less of a challenge to those in power.

At the international level, the U.S. played a leading role in endorsing Afghanistan's highly centralised constitutional system. However, this hyper-centralisation locked the U.S. into the political order it helped create, preventing it from holding that system accountable. This approach integrated central authority with the concept of statehood and incorporated the U.S.'s main goals into Afghanistan's executive structure (Cooper, 2018; SIGAR, 2021; Suhrke, 2011). Since the 2004 Constitution assigned almost all executive power to the president, U.S. backing for this system depended on the president's continued tenure; however, when Karzai's patronage politics or Ghani's exclusionary governance fuelled conflict and corruption, the U.S. became ambivalent about holding the president accountable. Challenging the presidency was perceived as a risk to the stability of the political order that symbolised American state-building achievements. Likewise, this situation resulted in what the study describes as "international patron reluctance," hesitation among the U.S. and its allies to advocate for or associate support with significant reforms or demanding accountability. Therefore, while the 2004 Constitution sought to promote democracy through control, unifying through exclusion, and seeking legitimacy through external support, U.S. policy also helped create this hyper-centralised yet fragile state that appeared stable externally and coherent on paper, yet struggled to manage the insurgency it was supposed to end.

Chapter 5: Aid Dependency

The U.S.-led coalition launched an ambitious foreign aid initiative for state-building and peace in Afghanistan after 2001 (Afsah & Guhr, 2005; Farley, 2021; Rubin, 2006). Despite this massive investment, which promised the Afghan people genuine democracy and stability, foreign aid reinforced pre-existing power dynamics and conflicts in the country. Many scholars argue that foreign aid fell into the Afghan traditional rentier system, which enriched Afghan officials, empowered the Taliban, and perpetuated the conflict (Suhrke, 2011; Verkoren & Kamphuis, 2013). Along the pathway towards sustainable stability through central political institutions, foreign assistance also fostered symbiotic economic ties between the conflict factions, government elites and insurgents, providing both sides with incentives and capabilities to maintain the conflict rather than resolve it. This contradiction shows how foreign aid led to political reluctance among state elites, who prioritised war economy through narrow ethnic and factional interests over suppressing their co-ethnic Taliban insurgency.

International donors poured billions of dollars through the Afghan government, aiming to create institutional capacity and promote stability. Much of the foreign aid directed resources into centralised institutions, reinforcing executive dominance (Fishstein & Wilder, 2012), which revived the Afghan historical custom of the Muhammadzai Model of Governance (MMG)—a system characterised by ethnic hierarchy, central authority, and external dependence (Rubin, 2002; Suhrke, 2011). According to Suhrke (2011), Afghanistan generated a "rentier-state condition" in which the state's survival and legitimacy became heavily dependent on external rents (aid and military support) rather than on domestic revenue and taxation. In practice, foreign aid reproduced a concentrated power at the top that relied on factional and ethnic loyalties and on foreign assistance for survival. This situation cultivated "aid dependency". While ambivalent leaders hesitated to act beyond their ethnic interests, aid dependency reflected their fear of disrupting the external flows that sustained and legitimised their power. Afghan elites grew cautious about endangering the aid economy by tolerating, or even maintaining, some level of their co-ethnic insurgency and ongoing conflict as a justification for aid flows; otherwise, aid would be cut off, and loyal patrons would be alienated. So, the Republic became reluctant to reform because its survival depended on continued aid.

Inside the Republic, aid dependency was an essential tool for the elite's political survival. Both successive presidents, Karzai and Ghani, relied on external support to maintain their authority; they managed rivalries and ensured firm control over government institutions. Under Hamid Karzai, while massive aid continued, a centralised presidency enabled him to manage a vast rent-based network linking Pashtun tribal leaders, former Mujahideen, and other regional powerbrokers; his careful calculation of rent-based governance for stability relied heavily on corruption as a reward instrument in exchange for loyalty (Coburn & Larson, 2014; Englehart, 2015; Fishstein & Wilder, 2012). Equally, however, Ashraf Ghani rhetorically pledged to reform but continued to follow the same approaches, monopolising donor funds through his narrow circle of technocrats' loyalties (SIGAR, 2022b). In this context, loyal elites to the president acquired prestigious state positions and benefited from donor-financed civil service salaries and other public benefits. The World Bank and SIGAR reported comprehensive salary support and reward schemes for the top state elites (SIGAR, 2017a; World Bank, 2019). Donor-oriented bodies dominated government branches, turning politics into a competition for rents (Fishstein & Wilder, 2012). Likewise, since ongoing aid flows secured the Republic's survival, presidents were able to manage their co-ethnic insurgencies while also supporting their own power circles. Consequently, instead of coercion, presidents preferred to let their co-ethnic insurgents receive some portion of aid to avoid risking their Pashtun base. This situation reinforced the rentier economy and perpetuated the war economy.

This foreign assistance was supposed to establish a single regime in the country; instead, it also nourished the Taliban to have a shadow regime under the guise of insurgency, which also profited from the aid in their contested territories. The Taliban were motivated by witnessing how their co-ethnic elites within the Republic enjoyed the flow of aid. So, they managed themselves within the same financial networks by taxing contractors, extorting local development projects, and controlling territories that housed aid-funded infrastructure; as a result, the Taliban transformed foreign assistance into a reliable source of funding for their insurgency (Giustozzi, 2019; Jackson, 2018). In the contested territories, the Taliban made aid agencies and private trucking companies who transport military equipment for U.S. and international forces to pay "security fees" or share contract revenues in exchange for access, effectively institutionalising rent extraction under the insurgents' shadow regime. This condition created a war economy in which the more aid came in, the greater the Taliban's opportunity to raise revenue. For both the Republic and the insurgents, aid became a shared

economic resource disguised by ongoing conflict, nurturing a political economy in which war itself became profitable (Goodhand & Hakimi, 2014; Jackson, 2018; Schifrin, 2010).

The international community, mainly the U.S., provided enormous aid to the Afghan government to strengthen it against the Taliban and establish peace. However, in practice, aid flowed under the banner of stabilisation and counterinsurgency, often prioritising short-term objectives and rapid disbursement of funds over long-term sustainability and proper oversight (Fishstein & Wilder, 2012; Suhrke, 2011). Meanwhile, the same foreign aid, distributed through international contractors, also made up a complex patron-client relationship that blurred the line between governance and corruption (Goodhand & Sedra, 2009; A. Hakimi, 2013). Likewise, funds aimed at reinforcing the state and undermining the insurgency often ended up in Taliban-controlled areas, where aid enabled them to obtain both financial resources and local legitimacy (Giustozzi, 2019; Jackson, 2018; Sexton, 2016).

Thus, the relationship between aid and conflict became mutually reinforced, so that ongoing violence justified the flow of aid, while the aid itself supplied resources to prolong the conflict. So, international assistance became a cyclical political economy in which all participants—government elites, insurgents, and intermediaries—had material incentives to sustain rather than resolve the conflict (Goodhand & Hakimi, 2014; Sexton, 2016; Suhrke, 2011). In addition, foreign aid also reinforced Afghanistan's long-standing MMG tradition, constructing a political state that relied heavily on external resources for survival. The Afghan elites calculated that meaningful conflict could jeopardise the aid economy itself, avoiding any aggressive reform (Fishstein & Wilder, 2012). As a result, foreign aid failed to end the conflict; instead, it developed dependence and bred reluctance at all levels of governance. So, aid became both a symptom and a sustainer of reluctance, ensuring that the more it flowed, the less incentive there was for resolution.

This chapter discusses how foreign aid nourished both the government and the Taliban. Section One places Afghanistan's aid dependency in the broader context of how foreign assistance operates across diverse communities. Section Two analyses the Afghan government as a reluctant beneficiary and provides a brief overview of the U.S.–Afghan relationship. It explores how funding reluctance operated through foreign aid and how non-Pashtun Mujahideen hesitated against the Pashtun Taliban's advancement. Section Three explains the Taliban as a motivated aid beneficiary, their historic association with the United States, and how funding for insurgency operated through foreign aid. Section Four explains that the U.S.

aid approach fostered symbiotic economic ties between the conflicting parties, thereby persisting the war and leading to the country's collapse in 2021. Finally, Section Five presents a summary of the key findings and implications of foreign aid's dual role in sustaining both the Afghan government and the Taliban insurgency, thereby prolonging the conflict.

5.1 Foreign Aid in Heterogeneous Communities

The inquiry of whether foreign aid mitigated or escalated the conflict in heterogeneous societies, such as Afghanistan, has remained a critical area of investigation for local and international academics in the field of conflict studies and development (Ambassa et al., 2024; de Ree & Nillesen, 2009; Mousseau, 2021; Nielsen et al., 2011). Current studies acknowledge the significant role of foreign aid in conflict resolution and economic growth in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, scholars warn that if aid distribution favours particular ethnic groups or political factions, often at the expense of others, it could worsen divisions, increase tension, and create resentment and, in turn, encourage conflict among dissatisfied factions (de Ree & Nillesen, 2009; Findley et al., 2011). Likewise, utilising aid resources for ethnically driven purposes may deepen divisions and contribute to armed conflict and violence. These potential outcomes emphasise the need for a more careful approach to aid allocation and implementation (Mousseau, 2021; Reyntjens, 2013). In the case of Afghanistan, earlier investigations have often overlooked how foreign assistance can inadvertently trigger the conflict and hostilities, contributing to over 270 years of conflict.

Additionally, studies from multiple disciplines have sought to explain how aid interacts with ethnic and political structures. It explores the essential function of governance and institutions in aid distribution within multi-ethnic societies. Current literature acknowledges that the quality of governance plays an important role in determining whether aid mitigates or aggravates conflict. Likewise, weak or corrupt political institutions often strengthen rent-seeking orders in aid distribution, fuel perceptions of bias, and could further worsen current ethnic tensions by promoting unfairness and a lack of participation in resource distribution (Dietrich et al., 2018; Wimmer, 1997). Understanding this dynamic is crucial to devising efficient aid distribution methodologies in multi-ethnic contexts. In Afghanistan, assistance often nourished a rent-seeking governance. The donors mostly directed their assistance through central institutions and influential individuals. This strategy strengthened existing ethnic hierarchies and contributed to a sense of exclusion among marginalised communities.

Likewise, examining how foreign aid influences peace or conflict in diverse societies requires a collective effort among international relations, conflict resolution, and development studies. Moreover, ethnopolitical perspectives are significant in this collective action because ethnic identities, grievances, and power struggles often influence aid allocation, perceptions, and contestation (Blagojevic, 2009). External actors and patrons, including international organisations, also shape these dynamics through their political and strategic interventions (Sexton, 2016). As discussed before, many studies have found that governance quality is crucial in determining whether foreign aid fosters peace or fuels instability. Therefore, inclusive and transparent institutions can prevent individual dominance over aid, while fragile and highly centralised political institutions tend to channel aid flows to elites at the top (Dietrich et al., 2018; Wimmer, 1997). Anthropological and sociological perspectives further show that the local legitimacy of aid depends on how communities interpret and engage with external assistance within specific historical and cultural contexts—processes that can either reduce or exacerbate conflict dynamics (Blagojevic, 2009; Dietrich et al., 2018).

The twofold causes of aid highlight the complexity of divided societies and call for a more cautious, flexible aid strategy. Studies also emphasise that highly centralised or donor-oriented governance risks the very division that Aid desires to heal. So, for better aid distribution, one must gain sufficient knowledge of local power structures and ethnopolitical hierarchies and regularly review aid distribution processes to mitigate the unintended consequences of external intervention. Several studies have provided empirical evidence. For example, de Ree and Nillesen (2009) found that aid can empower individuals in the absence of domestic legitimacy, likely worsening instability. Also, Grossman (1992) indicates that rebels are more likely to commence conflict when they believe the profits from capturing aid-funded resources outweigh the risks. Findley et al. (2011) reviewed the conflict data in Sierra Leone, Angola, and Mozambique. They found that areas that received more aid often faced increasing conflict. These results are not limited to cross-country analyses but also to post-conflict situations, where aid dependence provides sufficient political motivation (P. Collier & Hoeffler, 2007; de Ree & Nillesen, 2009; Grossman, 1992; Findley et al., 2011).

Likewise, in countries with weak institutions, heavy dependence on external funding can damage government accountability and worsen inequality (Moss et al., 2006). When citizens believe that there is unequal access to aid resources, ethnic tensions may escalate, promoting the risk of violence (Mousseau, 2021). For example, after the 1994 genocide, Rwanda received considerable international aid for reconstruction and recovery. Although the Rwandan

government used this aid to promote national unity and development, scholars argue that it also consolidated authoritarian control and curtailed ethnic expression, generating new forms of tension (Reyntjens, 2013). These examples show that the societal, diversity, and inclusivity contexts of political institutions have a critical impact on aid outcomes.

Equally, after 2001, the massive amount of aid in Afghanistan reproduced the tradition of the MMG rentier-state. Political authority and legitimacy were derived less from domestic taxation than from the control and distribution of external rents (Rubin, 2006; Suhrke, 2011). Aid sponsored loyalty instead of strengthening institutional accountability. This elevated elite power and revived ethnopolitical hierarchies (Goodhand & Hakimi, 2014; A. Hakimi, 2013). Moreover, the centralisation of authority enabled Pashtun elites to monopolise access to foreign assistance and buy off loyalty. Historically—from the British and Soviet interventions to U.S. involvement after 2001—foreign powers reinforced these dynamics by funnelling resources through existing patronage networks (Rubin, 2006; Suhrke, 2011). For Afghan elites, power became synonymous with access to aid and wealth accumulation, while marginalised people view this approach as unfair and exclusionary (A. Hakimi, 2013). The elites within the regime and the Taliban profited from U.S. and international community assistance in different ways. Regime officials gained from official appointments, rents and other governmental advantages while they had opportunities for corruption; meanwhile, the Taliban conducted their shadow regime and extracted resources through methods such as taxation, extortion, and control over aid distribution (Goodhand & Hakimi, 2014; Jackson, 2018).

Many studies have analysed the self-reinforcing tie between foreign aid and conflict in Afghanistan; however, the outcomes are often mixed and heavily depend on the local context. For example, a study examining the insurgents' strategic response to aid allocation indicates that the more aid that comes into contested areas, the more often it provokes greater Taliban aggression, damaging the "hearts and minds" approach (Sexton, 2016). For instance, provinces such as Helmand and Kandahar, which comparatively received more aid, experienced greater insecurity; by contrast, relatively stable provinces such as Bamiyan and Panjshir received less aid. Similarly, a study found that spikes in domestic terrorism usually led to increases in aid, particularly from the U.S., as donors sought to stabilise affected areas (Lis, 2018). Other studies also found links between increases in U.S. food aid and higher insurgent activities, for example, in Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Afghanistan. These cases show that more aid inflows can intensify violence by providing more opportunities for resource exploitation (Nunn & Qian, 2014). However, the results remain mixed: while some studies find that increased aid can

encourage insurgents to attack under weak institutions, others show that well-targeted, community-based, or conditional aid can lower conflict (Beath et al., 2013; E. Berman et al., 2011). So, the impact of aid on conflict depends critically on timing, institutional quality, and local power dynamics (Findley et al., 2011).

The U.S. tied aid allocation to security conditions. This connection prompted Afghan elites and their international intermediaries to demonstrate progress while simultaneously perpetuating instability that justified the continuation of aid (Goodhand & Sedra, 2009; Suhrke, 2011). Such dynamics have cultivated a complex interplay of motivations among both state and insurgent actors: the regime has managed a low-level conflict to ensure a steady flow of aid, whilst the Taliban has prolonged its insurgency to leverage conditions for resource extraction. Studies show that aid allocation often increases insurgent activity in contested areas, and the surge in domestic terrorism can increase bilateral aid. These results are mixed and often opposed, with effects that depend on context. Sometimes it can promote stability when allocated transparently and inclusively, while it can trigger or intensify conflict when seized by elite factions or tied to the elites' narrow ethnopolitical interests (Fishstein & Wilder, 2012; Suhrke, 2011). Hence, better and effective aid strategies must be flexible, aware of current conflicts, and guided by local power structures and historical backgrounds. Finally, the existing literature suggests that aid serves not only as a means of development but also as a political tool that both influences and is affected by conflict. Because its effect largely depends on the political context. So, with awareness of the local community and through an accountable, transparent political institution, aid can reduce or even resolve conflict (Ambassa et al., 2024). Thus, it is crucial to understand these dynamics to create aid policies that are sensitive to conflict and promote peace, rather than contribute to instability.

5.2 The Afghan Government: Keen on Aid, Reluctant in War

5.2.1 The U.S.–Afghan Relationship

The United States and its allies started a campaign to overthrow the Taliban regime immediately after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, as the Taliban harboured Al-Qaeda, the group responsible for the event. By December 2001, they had successfully toppled the Taliban (Coll, 2018; Jones, 2009). Then, the U.S.-led coalition launched an ambitious and costly state-building and reconstruction project in Afghanistan to establish a democratic government, promote economic growth, and improve social welfare, as part of a broader approach to ensure

national and international security (Rubin, 2006; Suhrke, 2011; Goodhand & Sedra, 2009). The U.S. and its partners helped establish the Afghan government and endorsed Hamid Karzai as the interim leader and later as president. It was a highly centralised government, consistent with international preferences for strong executive authority to facilitate aid coordination and stabilise the country. However, the conflict did not end; it evolved into a lengthy fight in which the Taliban waged a guerrilla-style insurgency against the internationally backed Republic and coalition forces for almost two decades (Giustozzi, 2019). Consequently, ongoing insecurity and conflict, endemic corruption, and weak governance severely constrained Afghanistan's reconstruction outcomes. Despite the deployment of over one hundred thousand international troops and the allocation of billions of dollars in foreign aid, Afghanistan remained one of the world's most insecure and poorest countries (SIGAR, 2021, 2022a).

To regularise the U.S.-Afghan long-term partnership, both states signed a series of bilateral security and partnership agreements between 2001 and 2021 that outlined commitments for the U.S.'s military assistance, counterterrorism cooperation, and sustained financial support. U.S. assistance was supposed to promote security, democracy, and self-reliance by strengthening Afghan political institutions and the national army. Accordingly, to support peace, capacity-building and good governance, economic growth and social development, particularly in education, health, women's rights, and the rule of law, excluding assistance from the wider international community, the U.S. spent an estimated $2.3 trillion in Afghanistan, covering the U.S. war expenditure, reconstruction, and humanitarian programmes, besides security assistance (Crawford & Lutz, 2021; SIGAR, 2021). The U.S. allocated around $36 billion for reconstruction and development (including around $787 million for programs supporting women and girls), and nearly $3.9 billion for humanitarian assistance (SIGAR, 2021). It also provided roughly $17 billion in on-budget support to the Afghan government, in addition to funds through security assistance programmes. Additionally, the U.S. spent approximately $73 billion on total military and security assistance, including equipment, services, and infrastructure. Most of its security aid is delivered via the Afghan Security Forces Fund to pay salaries, procure equipment, train personnel, and fund operations for the Afghan army (SIGAR, 2017a, 2021).

In summary, the White House viewed the Afghan state as a crucial partner in counterinsurgency and therefore provided it with massive political and financial support from 2001 to 2021. Nevertheless, aid distribution was highly uneven. A highly centralised ethno-political institution design and inequality, alongside ongoing conflict and insecurity,

corruption, and poor oversight, enabled Afghan elites to divert significant portions of U.S. aid for personal enrichment, promoting patronage networks while pursuing narrow their ethnic interests. This situation led to the emergence of a rent-seeking elite class, mainly among Pashtun power brokers, who gained wealth and influence through privileged access to appointments, contracts, and development funds (Ambassa et al., 2024; Goodhand, 2004; Goodhand & Sedra, 2009). Therefore, while U.S. aid was essential to supporting the Republic, it also reinforced a political economy in which aid mainly benefited self-interested individuals rather than promoting institutional reform.

5.2.2 Financing Reluctance Through Foreign Aid

Between 2001 and 2021, elites and individuals closely aligned with U.S. officials, particularly within the Pashtun leadership, received substantial benefits from foreign aid in two ways. First, at the broader level, foreign aid promoted peace, reconstruction, and economic development, helping build roads, telecommunications networks, and energy infrastructure that eased the Afghan central government's burden in public service delivery, enhanced its presence and connectivity, and ultimately strengthened its legitimacy (Beath et al., 2013; SIGAR, 2017a, 2021; UNDP, 2006). At the state level, foreign aid enabled Afghan politicians to build their political power bases and networks while accruing personal financial gains. It allowed them to control state institutions and create a new class of rent-seeking elites (Kühn, 2008; Verkoren & Kamphuis, 2013). They had top positions with high salaries, prestigious appointments, social and political influence, and various government privileges. However, the aid apparently promised to promote development and democracy, but ultimately reinforced existing patronage networks and elite dominance, worsening widespread and systematic corruption rather than improving ordinary people's lives (Rodríguez, 2023; SIGAR, 2016a).

Foreign aid had a significant role in sustaining the Afghan state after 2001, but it also revived the tradition of ethnopolitical hierarchies. Pashtun elites, who historically dominated Afghanistan's political framework, retained control of the leadership and other government institutions throughout the Republic era (Schetter, 2005; Suhrke, 2011). Although foreign aid has supported Afghanistan's development and economic growth, most of the benefits were drained by politically connected elites who exploited government positions and donor initiatives for their own enrichment (Goodhand & Sedra, 2009; SIGAR, 2021). During Ashraf Ghani's presidency, key administrative departments became highly centralised and occupied by personnel selected through presidential patronage networks that mirrored ethnic and

factional loyalties (A. Hakimi, 2013; SIGAR, 2021). Senior officials and advisers connected to the presidency networks benefited from donor-financed salaries and privileges that boosted their political influence. While civil servants, teachers, and soldiers received subsistence wages (SIGAR, 2021). This gap between elites and ordinary people illustrates that, rather than promoting inclusive development, foreign aid led to the rise of a privileged elite that viewed state institutions as business opportunities rather than as vehicles for public service delivery.

This thesis argues that both Karzai and Ghani used corruption as a political tool to reward their loyalists. They tolerated or ignored corruption, embezzlement, waste, and the misuse of public property and resources within their circles of power. Many studies have documented widespread corruption in Afghan institutions. This is why Afghanistan became one of the most corrupt governments in the world between 2001 and 2021 (SIGAR, 2016a, 2021; Transparency International, 2022). For example, Karzai's inner circle—including his brother Mahmoud Karzai and his vice president's brother, Haseen Fahim—was implicated in the Kabul Bank scandal, which Karzai helped cover up. Karzai also appointed many corrupt Mujahideen to critical positions in exchange for their loyalty. Research shows that Karzai shielded officials engaged in drug trafficking and illicit enrichment in return for their political loyalty (SIGAR, 2021). His brother, Ahmad Wali Karzai, had close ties to the drug trade in Kandahar and was reportedly on the CIA payroll (Baker, 2009; Filkins et al., 2009; Rodríguez, 2023). In addition, Mahmoud Karzai, another of Karzai's brothers, amassed considerable wealth through business ventures widely observed to benefit from his familial connection to the presidency, notably his involvement in the bankruptcy of Kabul Bank (Habib & Sarwan, 2009; Hardie, 2020). These rent-seeking ties went beyond family; power brokers often bought high-level government roles and recovered their investments via corruption and graft (Chayes, 2014; SIGAR, 2016a). These Karzai political deals created extensive impunity that shielded individuals involved in such activities. Ashraf Ghani also used corruption as a means of political reward, but on a dramatic scale, with repeated allegations of nepotism, favouritism, and elite influence. Global Witness revealed that a company partially owned by Ghani's brother had illegally purchased chromite mined in Afghanistan, demonstrating how political connections helped gain access to lucrative natural resources (Kopplin, 2021). Ghani also appointed officials involved in major corruption scandals, such as former Education Minister Farooq Wardak, linked to the "ghost schools" scandal involving thousands of fake schools, teachers, and students (Harte, 2015; TOLOnews, 2020a). During Ghani's leadership, corruption became concentrated among a small group of loyal Pashtun technocrats. Moreover, international donors continued to fund exceptional

salaries, which helped sustain and deepen this system, exacerbating inequality and consolidating power within a narrow Pashtun elite (SIGAR, 2021). For instance, Ghani appointed Ajmal Ahmady, a former economic adviser and commerce minister, as acting governor of "Da Afghanistan Bank". It was widely seen as a move to reinforce Ghani's influence over the central bank, given Ahmady's close ties to the president's family, raising concerns about the bank's independence (Bahesh, 2021; Hardie, 2020). Furthermore, Ghani created a National Procurement Commission to oversee all government purchases directly, thus centralising control over state contracts and financial decisions (SIGAR, 2018b, 2021). These attempts to monopolise access to aid demonstrate how foreign aid, patronage, and inequality reinforced the rentier approach to governance, prioritising political loyalty and regime survival over essential institutional reforms. Ashraf Ghani protected his National Security Advisor, Hanif Atmar, despite ample allegations of corruption against him. Ghani personally controlled all government procurement under the National Procurement Authority (NPA) and appointed loyalists through special appointments linked to his inner circle. He also shielded any investigation into the "First Lady's Office" patronage network, among other examples (Callen & Long, 2015; SIGAR, 2016a; Sopko, 2018; Transparency International, 2022)

In conclusion, foreign aid produced a new class of Afghan political elites, particularly within the Pashtun power structure, who became the principal beneficiaries of international assistance from 2001 to 2021. While enjoying broader patterns of construction and development, these Afghan elites secured high-ranking positions that came with substantial salaries, prestigious appointments, social and political influence, control over aid distribution, and many other governmental privileges, as well as opportunities for corruption. Although foreign aid promised to boost accountable governance and strengthen national stability, it instead reinforced rent-seeking behaviours, worsened social and economic inequalities and institutionalised systemic corruption. The provision of foreign aid supported individual actors and political factions rather than strengthening state institutions. Thus, foreign aid became a political instrument that sustained elite control with limited accountability. This situation damaged key elements of state-building and democratic reform, leading elites to hesitate to suppress the Taliban, as this might jeopardise the profitable war economy. So, it left them comfortable with the persistent conflict.

5.2.3 Corruption as a Mechanism of Control

Afghanistan's post-2001 political institutions were undermined by widespread and systemic corruption, which eroded trust, impaired oversight, and fractured the opposition; however, this process strengthened presidential authority. Alongside ethnic nationalism, extensive executive powers, and ongoing foreign assistance, these factors created a system in which corruption served both as a means of control and as a substitute for genuine governance. By 2021, Afghanistan's score was only 16 out of 100 and ranked 174th out of 180 countries on the global corruption index (Transparency International, 2022), showing the severity of corruption in the Republic (see previous section 5.2.2). Similarly, this study argues that both Karzai and Ghani deliberately employed corruption as a rent-seeking political tool to reward loyalty and fragment the opposition. For instance, Karzai was indifferent to the Mujahideen's corruption; in this way, the Mujahideen capitalised on widespread corruption, leaving them fragmented and unable to form a strong, united opposition against Karzai's sympathetic policy towards the Taliban. Similarly, Ghani allowed his supporters to benefit from massive corruption in exchange for their loyalty. Both presidents bought off the Parliament members to secure their favoured votes. The Taliban also benefited from the Republic's massive corruption in multiple ways. Thus, corruption was not just a symptom of weak governance but an active means of strengthening the president's control and maintaining authority. This created a climate of hesitancy in which elites resisted reform, comfortable with current affairs, especially in reaction to the Taliban insurgency.

Loyalty within Afghan political authority has traditionally been inseparable from wealth, patronage, and corruption. During various interventions, including British, Soviet, and U.S.-led coalition efforts, foreign aid was directed to rulers who utilised these resources, frequently involving corruption, as mechanisms to secure loyalty or fragment opponents (Barfield, 2022; Rubin, 2002; Suhrke, 2011). Likewise, public offices were regarded as rewards, with loyalty secured through appointments and contractual arrangements, and corruption was tolerated with exemptions (Chayes, 2014; SIGAR, 2021). Afghan leaders often co-opted opponents by giving them lucrative positions or access to rents and corruption with political impunity, transforming dissent into loyalty (Goodhand et al., 2021; Suhrke, 2011). Karzai formalised this model, co-opting Northern Alliance leaders, particularly Tajik figures, through strategic inclusion and tolerance of corruption (Goodhand et al., 2021; Rubin, 2013). What initially began as an ethnically diverse coalition evolved into a vehicle for elite enrichment, with former Mujahideen leaders, including notable Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek figures, joining the state apparatus to

prioritise personal gain over reform efforts (C. Johnson & Leslie, 2009; SIGAR, 2021). While the Mujahideen became reluctant to engage with national issues, Pashtun nationalists around Karzai, including his brothers and the Durrani tribes, consolidated their dominance within key institutions and gradually promoted Afghan nationalism with almost no opposition. For example, although both Pashto and Dari were designated official languages, Pashto was elevated symbolically through its exclusive use in the national anthem and its visibility on currency and state insignia, thereby embedding Pashtun identity in national symbols (Barfield, 2022; Constitution of Afghanistan, 2004). Due to the massive inflow of foreign aid, Karzai's network easily gained loyalty across all levels of government - executive, legislative, and judicial - by establishing a system in which everyone had a stake. In this situation, Karzai was prepared for his risky political gamble: "Brotherhood nationalism".

Ghani, like Karzai, also used corruption to buy off loyalties and suppress opponents. He implemented a variant of the patronage system under the guise of technocratic reform. He publicly advocated for meritocracy; however, his administration continued to exercise centralised financial control within the presidency and consistently prioritised Pashtun advisors and technocrats who owed him personal loyalty (Ayoobi, 2018; The Diplomat, 2015). Everyone within the loyalty circle was accustomed to corruption as the price of loyalty. For example, Ghani appointed corrupt figures such as Ajmal Ahmady, a close ally, as interim governor of Da Afghanistan Bank, after bypassing both ministerial authority and parliamentary approval. Additionally, however, direct evidence of the National Procurement Commission's role or of the transfer of the Ministry of Finance to the presidential palace is limited; a long history of systemic corruption and executive control over state contracts and finances by Ghani's networks is well documented (Packer, 2016; Ruttig, 2020). During the Trump administration, aid was significantly reduced; however, the remaining assistance was managed through centralised government, enabling the president to monopolise access to aid, use it to buy loyalties, and strengthen his control. Likewise, control over financial institutions, including the Ministry of Finance and the Central Bank, enabled the president to expand loyalty, fund patronage networks, and neutralise accountability (Chayes, 2014; Goodhand et al., 2021). Likewise, due to the reduction in aid, donor scrutiny increased, and corruption became more complex. Only loyal officials were protected from accountability for their misuse of positions, while opponents were dismissed under the pretext of corruption. For example, the repeated prosecution of Abdulrazak Wahidi, a Hazara minister, sharply contrasted with Ashraf Ghani's protection of Pashtun corrupt officials such as Ajmal Ahmady, Hamdallah Mohib, and Eklil

Hakimi, supporting perceptions that his anti-corruption campaign selectively targeted other ethnic elites while shielding loyal Pashtun technocrats (SIGAR, 2022c). Both parliament and the judiciary, which have long been embedded within the patronage system, offered little meaningful institutional resistance (Callen & Long, 2015; M. J. Hakimi, 2021). There were allegations that Ghani distributed cash to parliamentarians to buy their votes in his favour. Meanwhile, Northern Alliance members, already accustomed to corruption, were more willing to adopt the president's demands in exchange for any position that promised them wealth.

Therefore, widespread corruption has characterised Afghanistan's governance since 2001, leading to the conversion of political institutions into patronage networks, the fragmentation of oppositions, and the widening of the gap between rulers and citizens (Goodhand et al., 2021; SIGAR, 2021). Through weaponising corruption as both a reward for loyalty and a political tool for eliminating opponents, Karzai and Ghani entrenched what can be termed a reluctant regime: an institutionalised refusal to reform, coupled with persistent resistance to accountability (Barfield, 2022; Suhrke, 2011; A. J. Thier, 2020). The outcome was a neo-patrimonial regime, seemingly democratic but practically oligarchic, characterised by the monopolisation of power and resources by a few elites (Barfield, 2022; Chayes, 2014). Finally, this state, which was sustained by foreign sponsorship and systemic corruption, gradually eroded the Republic's legitimacy; it became incapable of survival once external support was withdrawn (Barfield, 2022; Rubin, 2013; SIGAR, 2022c).

5.2.4 The Former Mujahideen: Co-optation and Reluctance

Why did ex-Mujahideen leaders, who claimed to represent their ethnic groups within the Republic, notably the Tajik-led Northern Alliance party, become reluctant towards the Taliban's advancement? To answer this question, an investigation into the legacy of international aid in Afghanistan is needed. Specifically, to what extent did foreign assistance contribute to the political and military neutralisation of the non-Pashtun Mujahideen? Since the international community assumed that the root cause of Afghanistan's conflict lay in ethnic diversity and inter-ethnic tensions[24] (Edmondson, 2021; Murtazashvili, 2022; Schetter, 2002), and that the Mujahideen represented distinct ethnic groups[25], they sought to dissolve this order

[24] The perception that this study challenges.

[25] The Mujahideen were not genuinely representative of their ethnic groups; instead, they operated as individual powerholders driven by personal, political, and economic motivations (A. Hakimi, 2017; Schetter, 2003).

in favour of an integrative style of governance[26]. Studies indicate that the U.S. intentionally co-opted and gradually demobilised these former Mujahideen through various means, including financial incentives, government appointments, and disarmament and reintegration programs, such as the "Afghanistan New Beginnings Program" (Barfield, 2022; Giustozzi, 2009; Goodhand & Sedra, 2009; Semple, 2009; Suhrke, 2011; UNDP, 2006). Thus, these economic and political advantages successfully turned the ex-Mujahideen leaders into supporters of the central government under a Pashun president, diminishing their desire to oppose the central government and resist the Pashun Taliban.

The Mujahideen movement arose following the April 1978 Saur Revolution, when the Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) took power from the last Mohammadzai ruling elite. Their momentum increased after the Soviet military intervention in December 1979. What started as random rural protests against the PDPA's land reforms and repression eventually unified into a coordinated armed resistance against the Soviet-supported regime (Coll, 2004; Rubin, 2002). The Mujahideen made up a broad coalition of tribal, ethnic, and ideological factions united under the banner of jihad against communist and foreign domination (Rashid, 2010). Further, the Soviet invasion created an essential challenge for the U.S. during the Cold War. White House was concerned about Soviet advances in South Asia and, possibly, toward the Persian Gulf, which is vital to global energy security. So, Afghanistan became a strategic location (Crile, 2003; United States Department of State, 2014), which made President Jimmy Carter approve an initial covert aid of $695,000 to anti-communist insurgents on July 3, 1979 (United States Department of State, 2014). Similarly, President Ronald Reagan expanded the fund to about $630 million per year by 1987 (Coll, 2004; Crile, 2003). Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) oversaw this fund and worked closely with Saudi Arabia, mainly channelling support to Islamist factions rather than secular or nationalist groups. It significantly influenced the ideological character of the resistance (Rashid, 2010; Yousaf & Adkin, 1992). In addition, thousands of foreign volunteers, later termed the "Afghan Arabs", joined the conflict, among them Osama bin Laden (Bergen, 2002). Thus, the three intelligence agencies of the U.S., Pakistan and Saudi Arabia worked together to select, arm, and fund these anti-Soviet forces (Coll, 2004; Rashid, 2010).

[26] This study claims it is a democratic version of MMG.

Following the collapse of the Soviet-backed government in April 1992, various Mujahideen factions, which had previously fought against the communist regime, turned their arms towards one another in a violent struggle for control of Kabul (HRW, 2005; Rubin, 2002). Jamiat-e Islami, led by Burhanuddin Rabbani and his military commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, retained control over parts of the capital and much of northern Afghanistan. Competing factions included Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e Islami, Abdul Rasul Sayyaf's Ittehad-e Islami, Abdul Ali Mazari's Hezb-e Wahdat, and Abdul Rashid Dostum's Junbish-e Milli (Coll, 2004; Rashid, 2010). The resulting destructive conflict devastated Kabul, resulting in thousands of civilian deaths and significant destruction of the city's infrastructure, thereby further eroding public trust in the former resistance leaders (HRW, 2005; Rubin, 2002). In 1994, the Taliban seized Kabul and established Afghanistan's first Islamic Emirate until 2001. During this period, U.S. engagement in Afghanistan decreased as Washington moved away from the Mujahideen era. However, the Taliban's support for al-Qaeda caused increasing international isolation. Soon after, the U.S. re-engaged after the Taliban refused to hand over Osama bin Laden following the 9/11 attacks. The U.S. relied on Mujahideen, mainly the Tajik-led Northern Alliance, to defeat the Taliban regime (Bergen, 2002; Coll, 2004; Zeidan, 2025). Thereafter, these Mujahideen leaders integrated into the U.S.-backed Afghan government, though international observers repeatedly referred to them as "Warlords".

After 2001, billions of dollars in foreign aid poured into Afghanistan, principally centred in Kabul, resulting in the creation of a widespread rent-seeking and patronage network. This system rewarded loyalty by awarding government contracts, appointments, and protection (Sharan, 2022; SIGAR, 2022c). Accordingly, the U.S. neutralised many of these Jihadi commanders by co-opting them into government roles, including provincial governors, ministers, and members of parliament. For ex-Mujahideen leaders, this new order provided them with full access to aid and influence, but it required cooperation with both the central government and international actors controlling aid flows (Sharan, 2022). Meanwhile, demilitarisation initiatives eroded the ex-mujahedin's warfighting capabilities through material rewards (UNDP, 2006), though the initiatives' implementation was uneven and often selective (Giustozzi, 2009). These financial and political motivations turned the warlords into bureaucrats, who depended heavily on the central government and external funding for their survival and legitimacy (Giustozzi, 2009; Sharan, 2022). As a result, their fighting capabilities and independence diminished; consequently, many of these ethnic and regional power players, who once held substantial military influence, were politically neutralised.

International actors increasingly depicted former Mujahideen leaders as either corrupt or outdated, and warlords, which contributed to their marginalisation in state-building and governance reform efforts (Sharan, 2022; SIGAR, 2022c). In the meantime, once corruption spread, the Mujahideen distanced themselves from the people; as a result, many of these leaders lost credibility with their supporters. Although the Taliban was advancing, the presidents tolerated their progress; these Mujahideen leaders, lacking independent resources and local legitimacy, found it difficult to organise effective resistance. Additionally, the Afghan government's approach of calling the Taliban "brothers", which was often conciliatory, further discouraged these actors and showed Kabul's reluctance to confront the insurgency in a meaningful way (Murtazashvili, 2022). Eventually, these sidelined Mujahideen, feeling disappointed and helpless, either fled, surrendered, or tried to collaborate with the Taliban. Hence, partially due to the disarmament of militia initiatives and, mainly, to the failure of state-building efforts to create inclusive, sustainable institutions, severely undermined Afghanistan's internal defence capabilities (Murtazashvili, 2022; SIGAR, 2022c).

Therefore, the impact of U.S. aid on the Mujahideen neutralisation through political co-optation and the disarmament measures significantly eroded their contribution to Afghanistan's internal defence capabilities. Although international assistance apparently promised state-building, in practice, it unintentionally created a patronage system in which loyalty was linked to securing contracts, official positions, and protection (Giustozzi, 2009; SIGAR, 2019a). Former Mujahideen leaders, earlier operating as autonomous military leaders, were incorporated into formal state positions with various financial and political advantages; however, this change increased their dependency on the central government and international donors for survival and legitimacy (Giustozzi, 2009; Sharan, 2022). As a result, these commanders, previously fighting independently, turned into "reluctant Mujahideen", prioritising their own survival over collective resistance (Giustozzi, 2009; Sharan, 2022). When the Taliban re-emerged, many of these co-opted elites prioritised maintaining their patronage and personal security over resistance (Murtazashvili, 2022; SIGAR, 2022c).

The notion of ambivalent Mujahideen highlights two main facts. First, foreign aid, involved with patronage and identity politics, helped neutralise local power networks but, over time, made them reliant on the central government and diminished their regional autonomy. Second, by dismantling autonomous local power bases without installing reliable and inclusive institutions, international intervention paralysed Afghanistan's capacity to defend itself once U.S. support withdrew. Thus, the Mujahideen experience showed that the U.S. once regarded

the Mujahideen as strategic partners, then shifted its favouritism to new technocratic individuals within the Republic, ignoring the fact that stabilisation requires supporting reliable political institutions rather than individuals. What the U.S. did was shift its support from Mujahideen elites to the Republic elites – elite to another elite, individual to another individual – rather than backing inclusive and accountable political institutions to confront the insurgency.

5.3 The Taliban: Keen on Aid, Relentless in War

5.3.1 The U.S.–Taliban Relationship

The U.S.-Taliban relationship went through several phases: beginning with indirect relations during the Taliban's rise in the mid-1990s, then increasing tensions and clashes after the Taliban seized Kabul in 1996, followed by harsh U.S. military intervention in 2001. This was followed by ten years of military operations that shifted towards complete diplomacy from 2010 until the Doha Agreement in 2021, which led to the Taliban's return to power (Abbas, 2014; Giustozzi, 2019; Rashid, 2010; United States Department of State, 2020).

The roots of U.S.-Taliban relations date back to the 1980s, when some future Taliban members emerged from broader Mujahideen groups funded by the U.S., Pakistan's ISI and Saudi Arabia (Coll, 2004; Rashid, 2010). Later, the Taliban formed their movement and took over Kabul, dismissed the Mujahideen and established their Islamic emirate in September 1996. Due to some energy-route ambitions, such as oil and gas pipelines through Afghanistan, the U.S. interest in the regime increased, leading it to initiate cautious, limited engagement with the new regime (Marsden, 1998; Roy, 1997). Nevertheless, the Taliban's ongoing violations of human rights, especially their restrictions on women's education and employment, and their ongoing support for al-Qaeda leaders, hindered any chance of improving relations with Western governments (Farrell, 2018). The consequences of the 9/11 terrorist attacks prompted the U.S. to re-enter conflict, with military intervention alongside the Northern Alliance, which rapidly dismissed the Taliban (Farrell, 2018; Giustozzi, 2019). However, after establishing the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in 2001, the Taliban quickly reorganised their fighters. They began a limited guerrilla insurgency that gradually evolved into a sustained conflict, mainly along the Afghan–Pakistani border, while adapting their tactics and reestablishing regional influence networks (Abbas, 2014). Until the mid-2000s, despite increasing troop numbers, the U.S. and NATO efforts did not succeed in establishing lasting stability and effective governance against the Taliban insurgency (Farrell, 2018; Theros, 2023).

In 2009, President Barack Obama authorised a significant increase in troop numbers, sending an additional 30,000 U.S. soldiers to weaken the Taliban militarily and help create the conditions for political stability and reconciliation. This strategy is mainly centred on counterinsurgency and promoting reintegration programmes for insurgents willing to reject violence and accept Afghanistan's constitution (Farrell, 2018). This dual-track policy, comprising simultaneous combat operations and outreach for dialogue, became a defining feature of U.S.–Taliban engagement over the following decade (Giustozzi, 2019). President Donald Trump also continued this strategy by prioritising diplomacy. He appointed Zalmay Khalilzad as the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation to manage the negotiations with the Taliban. In 2018, direct talks between the U.S. and the Taliban began in Doha. The Taliban chose bilateral discussions with the U.S. instead of negotiations with the Afghan government. After nine rounds of talks, the parties reached an agreement that culminated in the Doha Agreement signed on 29 February 2020. According to this agreement, the U.S. and NATO agreed to withdraw all forces within 14 months, while the Taliban committed to stopping al-Qaeda and similar groups from operating in areas they control (United States Department of State, 2020; Poya, 2025).

Overall, US–Taliban relations shifted from military confrontation to conditional engagement from 2001 to 2021, culminating with the Doha Agreement in 2020. This accord required "intra-Afghan negotiations" between the Taliban and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan; however, these negotiations yielded few results, whilst the Doha process eroded the Afghan government's legitimacy. Conversely, the Taliban leveraged this process to improve their international legitimacy, expand their territorial control and deepen divisions between Kabul and Washington (T. H. Johnson, 2017; Theros, 2023). They successfully adopted the "negotiating to win" strategy, utilising dialogue to buy time while preparing for a comprehensive military offensive. The U.S. underestimated the Taliban's resilience and strategic patience, enabling them to leverage the peace process to their advantage without providing adequate guarantees or facing oversight (Biddle, 2002; Giustozzi, 2019). Therefore, U.S.-Taliban negotiations improved the Taliban's position from being just a terrorist organisation to a political entity; in effect, the U.S. dismissed the Republic and handed over Afghanistan to the Taliban very cheaply with few oversight measures.

5.3.2 Financing Insurgency Through Foreign Aid

The Taliban's access to international aid was traced back to events during the Cold War. The Soviet Union occupied Afghanistan militarily in 1979. In opposition to Soviet advances in South Asia, the U.S., through the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Pakistan's ISI, and Saudi Arabia, decided to support the Afghan Mujahideen. They secretly financed, supplied weapons and logistics, and trained Jihadi militias to combat Soviet forces. As a result, the U.S. channelled billions of dollars in aid to anti-Soviet factions (Coll, 2004). However, the Taliban had not yet existed as a distinct movement; many of its future leaders, including Mullah Mohammad Omar, took part in Jihadi groups during the 1980s and indirectly benefited from the resources and training provided by the U.S. (Rashid, 2010). The wartime mobilisation experience, combined with the ISI's ongoing influence over Afghan militant groups, particularly Pakistan's favouritism towards Pashtun Mujahideen factions, created the conditions suitable for the emergence of the Taliban later. There is no substantial evidence that early Taliban leaders received direct U.S. support; however, they established their initial networks within an approach sustained by American assistance and Pakistan's interest in Pashtun factions during the Soviet-Afghan war (Coll, 2004; Rashid, 2010).

Mujahideen successfully made the Soviet Union withdraw in 1989, but soon they plunged Afghanistan into civil war. The Taliban arose in the early 1990s and quickly removed the Mujahideen from Kabul. By 1996, they controlled most of Afghanistan (Goodson, 2001). Still, U.S. engagement remained limited until the Taliban's harbouring of al-Qaeda and the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings provoked international condemnation (Saikal, 2004). After the 11th of September 2001 attacks, the U.S. launched a military campaign and ousted the Taliban regime for hosting Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda. However, the Taliban reorganised very soon as an insurgency, taking advantage of the existing weak governance and aid systems in Afghanistan to survive and expand. Aid reinforced the Taliban on the broader and group levels.

On a larger scale, the U.S. and the international community allocated significant funds to reconstruction and development aid, resulting in considerable improvements in infrastructure, including roads, construction, media, telecommunications, public facilities, energy, and economic stability (Beath et al., 2013; Goodhand & Sedra, 2009; SIGAR, 2017c, 2021). Indeed, these investments strengthened the state's connectivity across the country and also improved social welfare sectors, such as education and health, for the Afghan population (Saunders, 2024; SIGAR, 2021). Yet, the Taliban used these establishments to enhance their

mobility and communication for insurgent activities (Hein, 2024; Saunders, 2024; SIGAR, 2021, 2022c). Additionally, donors' expansion of digital infrastructure, aimed at supporting civil society and promoting transparency, was co-opted by the Taliban for propaganda, recruitment, and digital mobilisation (Mehran, 2022; SIGAR, 2021). For example, the Taliban initially used paper-based "night letters" to spread their ideology. At the same time, they needed physical circulation and had limited access to the radio but later used facilities such as the internet and social media. Therefore, foreign aid, like dual-use assets, supported both the Afghan government and also boosted the influence of insurgent groups across the country.

On the group level, though foreign assistance helped the Afghan government to monopolise the governance and its local sources in the sake of public interest, the Taliban also made profits from a diverse revenue system, including involvement in narcotics, taxation in their areas, extortion, and protection fees like a shadow regime with almost full impunity. These financial arrangements contributed to a war economy that profited both sides of the conflict through international aid (Al Jazeera, 2021; Peters, 2009). Although it is challenging to provide substantial evidence of the Taliban's extreme dominance over donor-funded projects, studies of Afghanistan's conflict after 2001 consistently show recurring patterns involving aid, corruption, and insurgent control and revenue.

The Afghan government received substantial funds to combat drugs and narcotics; however, the Taliban ran illegal trafficking and narcotics trades in their areas with almost no consequences for over two decades (Azami, 2018; Forde, 2021; Peters, 2009). Also, the Taliban acted like a shadow regime, capable of imposing various taxes on individuals, goods, and key sectors in their regions. This income system collected religious taxes (such as zakat and ushr), highway tolls, and various charges on commerce, such as services, transportation, and utilities, often with impunity (Amiri & Jackson, 2022; Clark, 2022). In addition, they extracted natural resources in their controlled areas, including coal, marble and dimension stone, and lapis lazuli, generating millions of dollars in annual earnings before 2021 (Global Witness, 2016; Renaud, 2021). Moreover, the Taliban raised revenue through international aid by taxing, diverting, and collecting checkpoint, protection, access, and other fees for donor-funded projects. Research indicates that such aid often failed to bring stability and was susceptible to manipulation by armed groups (Fishstein & Wilder, 2012). Likewise, much evidence showed the Taliban charged various tax-like payments on NGOs and contractors, making the aid economy a reliable source of income for the insurgency, often with impunity, all while operating alongside the Afghan state, which foreign aid financed to prevent such

looting, bullying, and diversion of public sources (Clark, 2022; Forde, 2021; SIGAR, 2022c). Some other evidence estimated shortly before the takeover suggested that the Taliban's annual income approached approximately $1.6 billion from drugs, mining, taxation/extortion, and external donations (Azami, 2018; Bezhan, 2020; Forde, 2021).

In addition to narcotics and taxation, the Taliban earned revenue from the capture and redistribution of military equipment during the conflict. As the Afghan forces retreated or surrendered, the Taliban fighters systematically took control of abandoned vehicles, weapons, ammunition, and supplies (Mehran, 2022; SIGAR, 2021, 2022c). These U.S.-made weapons and supplies greatly enhanced the Taliban soldiers' combat capabilities and generated huge revenue through black-market trade, with some reportedly returning to government procurement channels. Equally, the Afghan officials often exaggerated battlefield losses to justify requests for renewed international funding or materials (SIGAR, 2016a, 2021, 2022c). This situation created a win-win patronage conflict, as analysts term it Afghanistan's symbiotic conflict economy, in which both insurgents and state actors benefit from the circulation of aid, military expenditures, illicit trade, and ultimately the conflict itself (Goodhand, 2004; Lyall et al., 2013; Mansfield, 2021; Mehran, 2022).

Additionally, the negotiations between the U.S. and the Taliban continued through the administrations of Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden (Farley, 2021; United States Department of State, 2020). This process increased the Taliban's international visibility. By granting the Taliban the status of a negotiating partner during the Doha Agreement in 2020, the U.S. lifted the perception of the Taliban from an isolated insurgency group to a legitimate political party with a proactive role in Afghanistan's future (Allen et al., 2020; International Crisis Group, 2020; Poya, 2025). So, the Taliban gained an opportunity to access diplomatic platforms, media coverage, and international dialogues to present themselves as moderate and politically mature, even as they continued their military advances. This negotiation, in the absence of the Afghan government, showed the Taliban as the primary decision-maker for Afghanistan's future following the U.S. withdrawal (Allen et al., 2020; Haider, 2021; Michael Semple, 2021). Thus, while presented as a step towards peace, the process ultimately ended up increasing the Taliban's political influence and weakening the Republic's legitimacy.

In summary, the U.S.-funded anti-Soviet campaign indirectly facilitated the rise of the Taliban, which funnelled billions of dollars through Pakistan's ISI with the ideological and financial cooperation of Saudi Arabia to Islamist fighters who later formed the foundation of

the movement (Coll, 2004; Rashid, 2010). Subsequently, this strategy developed into an aid environment that sustained the Taliban's movement and expanded their military operations. Foreign aid had both broad and direct advantages for the group. On a wider scale, foreign assistance promoted peace and reconstruction, built roads, established telecommunications and media infrastructure, and provided energy infrastructure. However, the Taliban used these advantages to improve their mobility, coordination, and communication capabilities. Though donors invested in digital systems to help Afghan civil society, the Taliban utilised them for propaganda and recruitment (Freedom Online Coalition, 2023; Mehran, 2022; Tapesh, 2023). More directly, the Taliban established a shadow state that managed diverse taxation systems, including zakat and ushr, imposed tolls, and ransoms on utilities and telecommunications agencies, charging "security fees" on aid organisations and also for illegal access to natural mines with full impunity. The group also profited from illicit trade and seized Afghan army military equipment and weapons (Amiri & Jackson, 2022; Clark, 2022; Fishstein & Wilder, 2012; Fleischner, 2023; Mehra et al., 2022). These conditions contributed to Afghanistan's symbiotic conflict economy, in which state, insurgent, and aid actors became interdependent through conflict-related rents (Fleischner, 2023; Goodhand, 2004; Mehra et al., 2022; Zyck, 2012). Moreover, the 2020 Doha Agreement legitimised this terrorist group politically by recognising it as a negotiating partner, and granted it international visibility and status (Afghanistan Study Group et al., 2021; Haider, 2021; Poya, 2025; United States Department of State, 2020). Therefore, the foreign assistance sought to stabilise Afghanistan eventually helped the insurgency by nourishing its financial resources, expanding its communication capabilities, and enhancing its political legitimacy.

5.4 Symbiotic Economic Ties

As discussed, efforts to provide assistance to combat the insurgency have ended up linking the conflict sides' income sources, thereby forming "symbiotic economic ties" between the state and insurgents. For example, during the U.S. war in Afghanistan, the CIA secretly attempted to sabotage the opium trade, which funded the Taliban insurgency, by dropping billions of modified poppy seeds between 2004 and 2015 (Strobel, 2025; Singh, 2025). The project focused on the central poppy-growing regions of Helmand and Nangarhar. President George W. Bush authorised the program as part of a highly classified project, but Hamid Karzai was not informed and was deeply opposed to aggressive counternarcotics measures (SIGAR, 2018a). Karzai strongly opposed suggestions such as aerial herbicide spraying, citing that such

measures might alienate his Pashtun base. During a video teleconference, when President Bush told him, “I am a spraying guy,” only for Karzai to bluntly retort, “Not in Afghanistan, you are not” (SIGAR, 2018a; Strobel, 2025). However, the U.S. was hopeful that the Afghan government would eventually opt for cooperation, but the Karzai cabinet firmly rejected any ground-based collaboration with this project in 2007. This lack of cooperation from the Afghan government left the CIA program politically isolated, without local support, and ultimately contributed to its termination around 2015 due to the high cost of aerial operations (Strobel, 2025). Despite nearly $9 billion in aid on U.S. counternarcotics programs overall, including law enforcement, farmer support, and covert CIA operations, the effort produced no lasting reduction in opium production (SIGAR, 2018a; United States Government Accountability Office, 2010). The Taliban collected revenue like a shadow regime from poppy fields in the territories. They continued taxing farmers and traffickers, using drug money to fund weapons and fighters, and to strengthen their insurgency. However, Afghan elites were diverting aid funds to secure loyalty. Karzai’s brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, was involved in drug trafficking, with allegations that he supervised heroin shipments and used his role as Kandahar’s provincial head for personal gain, with impunity (Al Jazeera, 2011; Lawson, 2010; Schulman, 2010). In addition, U.S. officials feared that perceptions of Karzai guarding his brother undermined U.S. credibility and revealed how Afghan elites also profited from the opium trade. In effect, the narcotics economy became a dual lifeline. While the United States allocated substantial resources—approximately 7.3 billion dollars—to counter-narcotics efforts in Afghanistan (Korte, 2025), it instead became a revenue scheme that supported the Taliban insurgency and enriched the President’s supporters by nurturing economic ties through poppy trade.

Another example involved payments for protection along trade and supply routes. Transport and contractors shipping aid-funded goods and military supplies often paid security fees to the Taliban for a safe passage in their controlled regions (Amiri & Jackson, 2022). As a result, the Taliban charged diverse taxes on international convoys and checkpoints, transforming foreign aid and military logistics into a continuous stream of income with impunity, because Afghan officials collaborated with the Taliban to keep these routes open, in exchange for maintaining stability within the districts. Karzai’s networks, such as those involving provincial governors and police chiefs, enabled Taliban checkpoints to operate or shared in revenue from aid, customs, and trade routes (Goodhand, 2004; Wentz & Black, 2017). This situation diverted U.S. aid from improving governance and logistics to indirectly supporting the Taliban’s war efforts, while Afghan elites were enjoying the flows of aid. It is

a reminder of how complex and interconnected these situations can be. Similarly, Karzai offered safe zones for the Taliban; he either tolerated or allowed the Taliban to have territories and influence in certain regions. He was accused of making informal deals with Taliban commanders to lower violence in areas aligned with his political allies (Katzman, 2014). However, Karzai's government portrayed an image of stability and avoided conflict in areas where control was limited. Furthermore, in 2010, Mohammad Zia Salehi, a senior adviser to Hamid Karzai, was detained for allegedly transferring illegal funds to top government officials, insurgent groups such as the Taliban, and illegal traders. He was released hours later following Karzai's personal intervention. This incident highlights the persistent issue of elite immunity. Hence, Salehi's political protection obstructed anti-corruption efforts, undermined the government's credibility, and bolstered insurgent claims that the Afghan government is corrupt and unjust (Sopko, 2018).

Likewise, the U.S. increasingly relied on influential local leaders such as Gul Agha Sherzai and Abdul Raziq because high-ranking U.S. officials viewed the Afghan president and central government as either reluctant or incapable of collaborating effectively with the U.S. to counter the Taliban (SIGAR, 2025). U.S. agencies frequently described Kabul as slow, fragmented, and constrained by corruption and political rivalries, which impeded rapid coordination (SIGAR, 2016a). Based on this study's argument, there should not have been a need for local powerbrokers, given the strong centralised government; however, in his memoir, Robert Gates, a former U.S. Defence Secretary from 2006 to 2011, portrays Hamid Karzai as increasingly distrustful, emotional, and erratic throughout his presidency. Gates observes that Karzai regularly accused the United States and NATO of causing civilian casualties and undermining Afghan sovereignty. He often attributed the rise of the Taliban to international forces pushing Afghans to join them. Gates notes that Karzai thought many Taliban members could be reintegrated into the political process through reconciliation. Additionally, Gates describes Karzai's ongoing criticism of U.S. military actions, especially night raids, which he claimed increased the insurgency rather than reducing it (Gates, 2014).

Gates also disclosed that Karzai harboured significant suspicions regarding prominent members of the Northern Alliance. He clarified that Karzai perceived these individuals as significant threats to his authority. Gates depicted this mistrust as profound, motivated by both personal animosity and strategic political considerations. More importantly, Gates highlighted that Karzai told U.S. officials that "Northern Alliance leaders were more dangerous than the Taliban" and asked for Washington's help in handling them (Gates, 2014). Hence, Karzai's

distrust of the Northern Alliance and the U.S., and his Brotherhood interpretation towards the Taliban, all while the Afghan government enjoyed massive U.S. investment, showed that the president was preserving his tribal and ethnic policies at the expense of the broader national interest. In the same line, Tom Tugendhat, the former Security Secretary of the UK, stated from his experience in Afghanistan, the Pashtuns are made up of a robust tribal society, all fighting with each other over power and resources for generations: Popalzai against Noorzai, Noorzai against Achakzai, Popalzai against Ahmadzai, and so on. We also turned out to be one of these "Zais" – we were "ISAF Zai" (Yakobi, 2025). All of this demonstrates how U.S. assistance nurtured symbiotic economic ties among Pashtun tribal rivals, or "brothers," competing to access resources, a pattern this study terms "brotherhood nationalism".

Similarly, when President Obama increased U.S. military powers to fight the Taliban, Hamid Karzai quickly criticised it for infringing on Afghan sovereignty and repeatedly opposed airstrikes and night raids (Boone, 2011; Graham-Harrison, 2013). In 2014, Karzai conditioned the U.S. presence on restarting talks with the Taliban in ways that strengthened the Taliban's negotiating position—rhetoric that aligned more with Taliban messaging than U.S. counterinsurgency goals (Al Jazeera, 2014). By refusing to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement and accusing the United States of perpetuating instability, Karzai positioned himself against American strategy while embracing a conciliatory stance as defender of the Taliban (Al Jazeera, 2014; Graham-Harrison, 2013). Similarly, in 2016, former President Hamid Karzai spoke to the Guardian following a violent week in Helmand province, during which the Taliban seized significant territory where 410 of the 455 British soldiers had previously lost their lives. This situation emphasised the significant sacrifices made by international forces. As the Taliban advanced towards Lashkar Gah, the provincial capital, government forces encountered substantial opposition losses. Afghan commanders requested increased U.S. airstrikes; however, Karzai strongly opposed this strategy. He stated, "They are very wrong – they are terribly wrong. Those who ask foreign forces to bomb Afghanistan are not representing the Afghan people or their interests." Karzai reaffirmed his long-standing stance against U.S. airstrikes and night raids, stressing that he had explicitly advised the Afghan government to stop requesting U.S. aerial assistance. He also argued that foreign forces should either leave Afghanistan or focus on tackling the Taliban's external backers in Pakistan (Rasmussen, 2016). Similarly, Karzai, in his meeting with President Obama, his national security adviser Tom Donilon, and other senior White House officials, generals, and intelligence officials, explicitly said the Taliban is not an enemy, and the U.S. should stop all

operations against them (Akbar, 2013). Equally, while the U.S. adopted a strategy of military pressure against the Taliban, Ghani asserted that "there is no military solution" to Afghanistan's conflict and actively advocated for direct talks and political negotiations with the Taliban, including the proposal of ceasefires and calls for the Taliban to declare national truces (The Times of India, 2021). Analysts have observed that, in contrast to his peace-oriented rhetoric, Ghani's dependence on U.S. security assistance and the Bilateral Security Agreement revealed a strategic tension between conducting counterinsurgency operations with U.S. support and pursuing political engagement with the Taliban (Siddique, 2014).

Lastly, the Afghan government consistently attributed their need for ongoing international financial assistance to the country's persistent conflict and insurgency. At the January 2010 London Conference, Afghan officials and international partners recognised the insurgency as a major obstacle to security, reconstruction, and state-building. They emphasised that Afghan security institutions would require continued international support, given the ongoing conflict (London Conference Communiqué, 2010). Again, at the July 2010 Kabul Conference, Afghan officials reiterated that, due to the ongoing conflict, the Afghan government was unable to collect local revenue and therefore required sustained foreign assistance for essential state functions (Kabul Conference Communiqué, 2010). The same theme was evident at the Bonn Conference in 2011, where the Afghan government warned that the insurgency threatened institutional stability and the long-term viability of the state; donors reaffirmed their commitment to supporting Afghanistan beyond the transition period (The Bonn Conference, 2011). The 2012 Tokyo Conference explicitly emphasised the importance of foreign assistance for Afghanistan during the current conflict, and the international community committed to the continued flow of aid to sustain security forces and state institutions (Tokyo Declaration, 2012). This logic also advised the NATO Chicago Summit in 2012, at which international partners committed to long-term funding for Afghan security forces, as the insurgency continued to pose a serious threat to national stability (Chicago Summit Declaration, 2012). Subsequent conferences, such as the Brussels Conference in 2016 and the Geneva Conferences in 2018 and 2020, reaffirmed this trend. Afghan officials consistently reasoned that, due to the ongoing conflict, state revenue declined significantly; therefore, it was vital for the international community to continue providing foreign assistance to Afghanistan (Brussels Conference, 2016; Geneva Conference, 2020). Moreover, some reports from organisations such as the World Bank and SIGAR also confirmed that the ongoing conflict reduced domestic revenue and increased security expenditures, leading to

Afghanistan's structural reliance on international assistance (SIGAR, 2019a; World Bank, 2018). Therefore, these conferences demonstrate that Afghan governments have regularly articulated their need for donor aid to address fiscal and institutional challenges arising from Afghanistan's ongoing conflict and insurgency.

Therefore, this body of evidence explicitly shows that U.S. and international assistance to Afghanistan created symbiotic economic ties among the government elites, insurgent groups, and local elites, resulting in a cycle of interdependence and shared income. Afghan leaders, particularly Karzai and Ghani, consistently used the ongoing conflict narrative to justify foreign aid and direct resources into the Afghan state. At the same time, they impeded counterinsurgency efforts by engaging in political obstruction, tribal favouritism, and secret cooperation with the Taliban. This underlines the paradox of foreign aid; although intended to strengthen the state's capacity and security, it has instead contributed to instability. Both the Afghan government and the Taliban benefited financially and politically from the ongoing conflict. Finally, Afghanistan's experience demonstrates how foreign assistance in fragile states can serve as a source of income and a vehicle for exploitation among rival groups, rather than a tool for genuine stabilisation and reform.

5.5 Summary

This chapter explained that the large influx of international aid to Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021 failed to deliver the promised stable or accountable government. Instead, it helped to create a rent-based, patronage-driven political economy that benefited Afghan government elites, empowered Taliban insurgents, and diminished the influence of local actors (Bizhan, 2018; Murtazashvili, 2022). The U.S. aid, which flowed through highly centralised institutions, revitalised the Afghan tradition of MMG, where power was concentrated in the presidency, maintained by ethnic and factional loyalties, and supported by external rents rather than by institutional accountability (Barfield, 2022; Murtazashvili, 2022; Rubin, 2002; SIGAR, 2022c). Foreign aid supported the Afghan government at two levels: the broader and the state levels. It helped Afghanistan's reconstruction and development, alleviating the burden on the central government, though it also diminished state accountability. In addition, Pashtun elites occupied key positions, held high-salaried placements, and managed contracts and aid flows, transforming aid into political leverage to maintain dominance and reward loyalty (Murtazashvili, 2022; SIGAR, 2016b, 2017a). Moreover, foreign assistance also neutralised

the Mujahideen from so-called liberators of the Soviet invasion to reluctant loyal patrons of the Republic. Former Mujahideen gradually co-opted into official state and donor-supported programs, accumulating exceptional wealth through aid-related patronage, government roles, and contracts, distancing themselves from their local bases and becoming reluctant to engage with national issues such as the Taliban's advancements (Giustozzi, 2009). Meanwhile, both presidents employed corruption to reward loyalists and to eliminate political rivals.

Meanwhile, the Taliban capitalised on the resource-rich environment, fueled by foreign aid, in two prominent ways. Foreign aid improved the overall quality of life in Afghanistan; both the Afghan population and the Taliban benefited from infrastructure improvements and development projects. However, the Taliban expanded their activities by establishing shadow-state functions, turning international aid into a means of generating revenue and increasing their influence (Amiri & Jackson, 2022; Fishstein & Wilder, 2012). Paradoxically, efforts to provide assistance to combat the insurgency ended up linking the conflict sides' income sources, forming "symbiotic economic ties" between the state and insurgents. On one hand, the conflict was tolerated and even tacitly supported by Afghan leaders who benefited from the war economy through patronage networks, protection rackets, and the opium trade (Rodríguez, 2023; SIGAR, 2022c). On the other hand, these same leaders strategically justified the conflict as grounds for continued assistance requests from the international community through successive conferences, framing ongoing violence as evidence of Afghanistan's need for sustained donor support.

Consequently, the two-decade international intervention in Afghanistan illustrates how foreign assistance created a war economy, reinforced individuals' and elites' motivations to prolong conflict rather than resolve it, creating an externally backed state that seemed functional but was essentially hollow. Hence, this chapter builds on previous chapters; three elements, Afghan nationalism, centralisation, and aid dependency, created a mechanism through which both sides of the conflict developed ethnic ties in line with Afghan nationalist idioms. Centralisation enabled presidents to practise Afghan nationalist ideology with minimal accountability, and foreign aid funded this political order. This dynamic perpetuated the conflict, frustrated the Afghan government and international partners, and rendered the system's eventual collapse inevitable.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The collapse of Afghanistan on 15th August 2021 has triggered widespread debates and disagreements among scholars and policymakers about how a state so heavily supported by the international community could vanish so quickly. Recent literature primarily highlights the collapse due to incapacity; however, this thesis argues that it resulted from two decades of political ethno-hesitation, institutional centralisation, and reliance on foreign aid, collectively produced "Political Reluctance", which profoundly shaped leadership behavioural and structural conditions that inhibited decisive action, risk-taking, and reform. Even massive international investment in military and development failed to prevent the Afghan government from collapsing almost two weeks before the U.S. completed its withdrawal from Kabul.

The analysis proposed in this thesis does not intend to replace or replicate existing explanations for the collapse of the Afghan government in August 2021. However, it suggests a shift in perspective—from the prevalent view of incapacity to the possibility of "reluctance." In other words, while prevailing explanations present the collapse as the result of the Afghan government's inability to change its fate or the inevitability of the situation, my thesis challenges this view. For example, existing explanations claim that corruption left the Afghan government unable to survive, or that the U.S. withdrawal caused the collapse, or that Pakistani support for the Taliban and Taliban ideology made survival impossible. According to these accounts, the collapse was inevitable. In contrast, my thesis rejects the victimisation of the Afghan government, recasting it as an active political player—one that could have survived despite the factors identified in existing explanations—and shifts the lens from incapacity to deliberate self-restraint as this study termed as Political reluctance. This political hesitation operated on three related tiers: the leadership, the regime, and the international community. Jointly, these parties initiated a self-reinforcing cycle of hesitation that fostered symbiotic economic relationships among aid, patronage, and conflict. Thus, this situation prolonged the conflict rather than alleviating it.

As discussed in Chapter 3, reluctance was prominently evident at the leadership level, in the political behaviour and practices of the presidents, namely Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani. Their hesitations, which highlighted ethnic accommodation rather than structural reform, the preservation of foreign aid rather than structural reform, and personal legitimacy rather than structural reform, can be best described as "ambivalent leadership." Karzai mainly depended

on tribal networks and elite negotiations involving patronage and rents rather than on building strong institutions. His ongoing use of fraternal discourse with the Taliban reflected a conciliatory attitude, rooted in the belief that stability depends on Pashtun reconciliation (Neumann, 2015; Schetter, 2005). His brotherhood practice towards the Taliban blurred the distinction between insurgents and the people, eroded the Republic's legitimacy among non-Pashtun and marginalised Pashtun tribal groups. Karzai allowed the Taliban to have their own geography and territorial control in rural Pashtun regions with impunity (Fishstein & Wilder, 2012). He frequently addressed them as "brothers," "misguided brother," or "our Taliban brothers," and externalised the causes of their insurgency (Burke, 2014; Pajhwok News, 2011; TOLOnews, 2013). He also repeatedly urged ISAF to stop airstrikes, night raids, and house searches in Pashtun-majority areas (Gopal, 2014; SIGAR, 2016a, 2021). Karzai repeatedly released Taliban detainees and provided them with cash and new clothes without consequence (SIGAR, 2021). This strategy intentionally demoralised a decisive military response against the Taliban and shifted the insurgency's perception from an existential threat to a political issue (Giustozzi, 2012; Synovitz, 2011).

Ghani's tenure reproduced many of these dynamics, but combined them with a technocratic, highly centralised style of rule. Although Ghani promised reform, he narrowed power among a small group of his loyal advisers and technocrats. Ghani ousted provincial power brokers and eroded the coalition essential to opposing Taliban advances (Murtazashvili, 2022; SIGAR, 2023). He proposed negotiations with the Taliban "without preconditions" (Hellman, 2018), emphasising their Afghan identity and calling them "fellow Afghans" and "stakeholders in peace" (Malkasian, 2021). His nationwide Eid ceasefires in June 2018 and May 2020 allowed Taliban fighters into major cities, blurring the lines between enemy and compatriot, while he released up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners, many of whom returned to combat (SIGAR, 2021). Non-Pashtun formations faced the brunt of combat, and operations in Pashtun-majority areas were selectively constrained (SIGAR, 2023). He also dismissed young, professional, and US-trained military officers (SIGAR, 2021). Although the Taliban's offensives increased after the Doha Agreement, Ghani emphasised his peace initiatives to integrate the Taliban into his leadership regime, revealing a leadership style that favoured conciliation over a strong national defence (Ruttig, 2021). In both administrations, the political reluctance to address the insurgency was ideological, rooted in the long-standing MMG custom (Barfield, 2022; Neumann, 2015; SIGAR, 2022c). These ambivalent leaders allowed the

Taliban to extend their influence securely by exploiting local frustrations and portraying themselves as a more cohesive entity than a divided and hesitant government.

As discussed in Chapter 4, at the regime level, reluctance originated from Afghanistan's traditional institutional design, known as the MMG. The U.S.-led coalition revived this model of governance under a democratic guise in post-2001 Afghanistan. Likewise, the Constitution of 2004 outlined the roadmap for Afghan state-building following the 2001 invasion. The U.S. and the international community, along with Afghan technocrats, drafted it as a democratic Republic, but in practice, the MMG's centralisation approach formed its structural backbone. It granted the presidency wide-ranging powers, including oversight of appointments in both the military and civilian sectors, budgets, and provincial administration, while offering limited mechanisms of accountability (Hussaini, 2022). The Constitution of 2004 granted the president broad executive, security, and military powers, further reinforcing Kabul's centralised political order. Consequently, the president could govern more like a king than a democratic leader. Moreover, the state's ideology of Afghan nationalism pushed the president to act like an ethnic dictator over an elected national leader. This design constrained all decision-making, prioritising elite patronage networks over structural reform. The constitutional design thus enabled hesitation as a legalised norm of governance, thereby allowing political survival and ethnic politics at the expense of responsiveness or inclusivity. These legacies created a "reluctant regime" that was resistant to reform, unable to self-correct, and hesitant to hold presidents accountable in their soft counterinsurgency approaches.

Lastly, as discussed in Chapter 5, at the international level, foreign aid sustained Afghanistan's domestic patterns of the rent-based elite's dominance and aid dependency. They delivered large amounts of aid through concentrated, narrow self-interest individuals, despite widespread awareness that corruption, exclusion, and over-centralisation weaken any system (Kühn, 2008; Verkoren & Kamphuis, 2013), because they preferred short-term objectives over long-term solutions and in-depth structural reform (Goodhand & Hakimi, 2014; Murtazashvili, 2022). This approach reflected what Goodhand and Hakimi (2014) argue that the intervention entered what they term a "political marketplace". Likewise, the conditionality of aid remained weak, and international assistance was reluctant to present results-based accountability or inclusion in aid distribution. To disguise this gap, international patrons rewarded symbolic compliance with reform agendas, though tolerating elite capture and rent-seeking behaviours. Moreover, empirical studies show that aid inflows into insecure regions often worsen conflict because of the risk that funds may drain into insurgent revenue streams through corruption,

taxation, and protection payments (Sexton, 2016). However, justifying aid flows requires the optimistic reporting by both the Afghan government and international intermediaries. As a result, international patrons hesitated to question the political economy of aid and the state's rent-seeking politics, which frequently blurred the line between fostering stability and sustaining conflict. Consequently, both Afghan elites and foreign donors were driven to preserve the current situation, ultimately hindering the very aims of peace and state-building (Goodhand & Hakimi, 2014; Murtazashvili, 2022; SIGAR, 2022c). Eventually, the "hesitant international patrons" reached their peak in reluctance when they prioritised abrupt withdrawal over a sustainable solution.

Therefore, the interaction among leadership, the regime, and international patrons' reluctance created symbiotic economic ties in which hesitation and avoidance became the default mode of governance. The Republic survived for over two decades, not for its capacity as a government, but because it received substantial external support through aid flows (Löfström, 2022; SIGAR, 2021). So, once the U.S. lifted its support, the Republic collapsed at remarkable speed. However, Afghanistan's fragility was not just a matter of misfortune or incapacity; instead, it was the outcome of highly centralised, exclusionary governance. The MMG constructed the Republic's backbone, urged Afghan nationalism, and enabled the Republic's elites to prioritise identity politics and dominance (Rubin, 2002; Schetter, 2005). Hence, domestic elites and their international allies maintained a rent-seeking political system that prioritised caution over reform and hierarchy over participation (Goodhand & Hakimi, 2014; Kühn, 2008; Verkoren & Kamphuis, 2013). To move past this legacy and achieve lasting peace, stability, justice, and resilience in democracy, it is necessary to dismantle the MMG and replace ethnically and religiously based nationalism with an inclusive civic nationalism that underscores citizenship, equality, pluralism, flexibility, inclusion and institutional accountability (Barfield, 2012; Murtazashvili, 2022; SIGAR, 2022c).

Furthermore, Afghanistan presents a complex case for liberal peacebuilding and externally driven state building (Chandeler, 2010). This is because externally imposed political and economic governance structures are often misaligned with local realities or ineffective (Dodge, 2013). But Afghanistan is not unique in this matter. History shows that Western interventions have influenced political and economic governance from the colonial era through the post-World War II period. They played a critical role in drawing borders, dividing populations, and creating new states, mostly in Africa and the Middle East (Herbst, 1989). Some countries, such as Japan and Germany, successfully rebuilt stable institutions and

economies under Western-led occupation and reconstruction in the post-war period, challenging the notion that externally supported state building is inherently destined to fail; rather, it depends on the local context. This is why I argue that the collapse of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan cannot be attributed solely to the limitations of liberal peacebuilding and externally driven state building.

Finally, some limitations affect the generalizability of these findings. First, visa restrictions and budget constraints prevented me from conducting direct interviews with Afghan generals, soldiers, and politicians, which would have provided valuable first-hand insights and strengthened the empirical foundation of the study. Second, there are ongoing security risks that make fieldwork in Afghanistan infeasible, so access to Afghan Republic documents and official correspondence that may still exist in government databases but are currently inaccessible under Taliban rule. Third, although process-tracing was used to examine causal mechanisms, future research could employ statistical analysis to investigate the relationship between foreign aid and conflict intensity from 2001 to 2021. Also, subsequent studies may extend this analysis to the second period of Taliban governance to evaluate how MMG has evolved under different political conditions.

This chapter concludes the thesis by recapping the findings and explaining the mechanism of political reluctance that contributed to the Republic's collapse. Section One describes the mechanisms of ethnonationalism, constitutional centralisation, and aid dependency, and abstracts them into a general model, indicating how they jointly nourish reluctance and the relationships among these factors. Section Two evaluates alternative explanations of collapse through classic tests and compares them with the thesis argument. Section Three reviews the changes in U.S. support, negotiations, and withdrawal policies across three administrations. Ultimately, Section Four offers recommendations by summarising the findings and situating them within the governance, nationalism, and international intervention in ethnically divided societies, particularly in Afghanistan.

6.1 General Model of Political Reluctance

The MMG fueled political reluctance during Karzai and Ghani's leadership: fraternal discourse, institutional centralization, and aid dependency. Collectively, these factors (MMG elements) led political leaders to hesitate decisively addressing the insurgency. This reluctance

undermined the legitimacy of suppression, enabled biased enforcement, and created symbiotic economic ties—all of which prolonged the insurgency and conflict.

On a discursive level, both presidents consistently described Taliban insurgents as brothers, fellow Afghans, and armed opposition instead of viewing them as real enemies. Both presidents prioritised reconciliation over coercion, undermining the legitimacy of confrontation and offering accommodation as a patriotic measure (SIGAR, 2019a, 2021, 2022c, 2023). For the Afghan army, which was already suffering some of the world's highest casualty rates, such discourse was deeply demoralising. It obscured the distinction between fellow Afghan citizens and enemies, and it justified constant ceasefires, amnesties, and prisoner releases. At the institutional level, the Constitution's centralisation of power in the presidency enabled selective enforcement by the president. Karzai and Ghani exploited this discretion to favour Pashtun loyalists in critical security appointments, delayed or hindered operations in southern provinces, and marginalised U.S.-trained officers against the Taliban. Although coercive capacity existed, backed by U.S. training, equipment, and funding, the authorities filtered their deployment through identity-sensitive calculations that muted enforcement where it threatened co-ethnic constituencies. At the resource level, large inflows of international aid fostered a rentier political economy that protected elites from accountability. Aid paid the Afghan government's salaries, contracts, and reconciliation initiatives that maintained elite coalitions, while it also benefited insurgents. Both presidents used corruption to reward loyalists; they tolerated corruption within their power circles in exchange for loyalty. SIGAR noted cases of payroll inflation, ghost soldiers, and massive procurement corruption. Moreover, concessions, such as the prisoner releases, were deemed necessary to keep donor support, even though they effectively strengthened insurgents' capabilities.

Collectively, these factors develop a generalisable model of political reluctance, reviving the wider tradition of MMG, in which Afghan nationalism prioritises co-ethnic solidarity over inclusive coercion, even risking the jeopardy of state survival. Furthermore, the three mechanisms form a self-reinforcing cycle. Fraternal discourse limited coercion, whereas institutional design translated that rhetoric into targeted enforcement measures. The aid provided financial support to both of them. Ceasefires and prisoner releases, which were justified discursively, were carried out through presidential decrees and funded by donor programmes. On the other hand, non-Pashtun commanders were excluded, while certain Pashtun elites were appointed through aid-supported appointments.

Thus, the Republic's collapse demands an in-depth exploration beyond the current sense of corruption, incapacity, or Pakistani sanctuaries alone. It was due to political reluctance, in which its three mechanisms operated together to discourage meaningful confrontation. This model displayed empirical evidence of expectations as follows. At the discursive level, presidential rhetoric characterised insurgents as brothers or fellow Afghans in their speeches and interviews, often accompanied by symbolic actions such as ceasefires and prisoner releases (A. Hakimi, 2013; SIGAR, 2019b, 2021). At the institutional level, there should be sufficient indication of selective enforcement, including fewer military operations in Pashtun-majority provinces, presidential efforts to halt military offensives, and the exclusion of non-Pashtun commanders from critical military leadership roles against the Taliban (Lyall et al., 2013; SIGAR, 2016a, 2021). Finally, at the resource level, there should be noticeable payroll irregularities, inflated contracts, and patronage deals that replace offensive actions, especially during times of increased donor scrutiny over civilian casualties (Chayes, 2014; SIGAR, 2019b, 2021). Hence, these pieces of evidence indicate that reluctance was not simply the result of weak leadership or incapacity, but a combination of rhetorical, institutional, and resource-related mechanisms. This section prepares the way for Section 6.2, in which alternative explanations will be examined through classic process-tracing tests to determine whether they support or replace the role of political reluctance.

6.2 Evaluating Rival Explanations Through Classic Tests

The current body of literature often explains the collapse of the Republic as resulting from widespread corruption and weak institutions, warlord influences, Pakistani safe havens, and the Taliban's rigid Islamist ideology. Each captures a relevant dimension of the conflict; however, they are common to the Afghan government's incapacity to survive or inability to act in certain situations. However, none alone justifies the fact that, although presidents commanding vast resources with almost absolute institutional power, strong international support, and a numerically superior army often chose not to fight enough against their co-ethnic Taliban. Therefore, this section utilises process-tracing tests of hoop, smoking-gun, straw-in-the-wind, and doubly decisive (George & Bennett, 2005), to determine whether these explanations constitute background conditions or potential factors, and, finally, to compare them with the argument of Political Reluctance.

The initial issue under debate is the Afghan state's incapacity, characterised by corruption, misappropriation of aid, bloated payrolls, and dependence on the U.S., all of which have weakened the government. According to SIGAR reports, although on paper, the Afghan army had over 300,000 fully armed and trained soldiers, the actual number was about 180,000 due to ghost soldiers and payroll fraud. By 2020, Kabul continued to rely on U.S. aid to pay salaries and operate. This shows that incapacity has significance, as it passed the straw-in-the-wind test, but fails the hoop test because incapacity cannot explain deliberate actions of restraint. The SIGAR reports collected sufficient evidence confirming the state's incapacity. However, it does not clearly explain the reasons behind many of the Republic's selective enforcements, such as decreased military actions in Pashtun-majority regions, regular releases of Taliban fighters, and repeated operational vetoes despite the availability of resources. The incapacity cannot explain why presidents often call the Taliban bombers "brothers". In addition, the Republic had extensive international backing, which could have prompted intervention. However, the President often opposed any international involvement against the Taliban. This means that coercive capacity was adequate but not fully utilised. Therefore, institutional incapacity made collapse possible, but political reluctance made it likely.

Another explanation emphasises warlord influences. The research has highlighted that the co-opted Mujahideen's leverage undermined the state's authority (Giustozzi, 2009; Rubin, 2002). SIGAR reported that the Mujahideen diverted resources via procurement contracts, corruption, and appointments. This evidence passed the 'straw-in-the-wind' test, indicating that warlordism weakened the central state's authority, but it failed the smoking-gun test for the observed pattern. Warlordism fails to explain why Karzai described the Taliban bombers and suicide attackers as unhappy brothers, while they were actually mass killing innocent people (A. Hakimi, 2013). Likewise, the reasons behind Ghani's decision to repeatedly release the Taliban prisoners and why military operations against Taliban forces in Kandahar in 2021 were repeatedly blocked. Therefore, if warlordism was the critical factor in states' collapse, all armed actors should have been treated equally. However, Northern Alliance Tajik commanders were marginalised, whereas Taliban figures were either tolerated or courted. This disparity indicates political reluctance rather than just a focus on warlordism.

A third perspective emphasises Pakistan's position as a sanctuary. The Taliban's Quetta Shura, ISI backing, and cross-border safe havens indeed offered strong support to the insurgency's survival (Rashid, 2010). Similarly, SIGAR reports highlighted that Pakistan's external support worked as an enabler for the insurgency's endurance. This evidence passes a

hoop test: without a sanctuary, the Taliban's resilience would have been considerably weaker. However, the Pakistani sanctuary is unable to explain Kabul's endogenous preferences, such as Karzai and Ghani's sympathetic gestures to the rank and file of the Taliban soldiers, Karzai's efforts to release Mullah Bradar from Pakistani jail or repeated Taliban prisoners' releases from Afghan jails between 2010 and 2014. Similarly, Ghani's unilateral Eid ceasefires in 2018 and 2019, the multiple Taliban prisoner releases, frequent operational stand-downs in Pashtun provinces, and sidelined U.S.-trained military personnel were all voluntary actions, not directed by Pakistan. There is no evidence that Pakistan dictated to the Afghan president to refer to the Taliban as "unhappy brothers" or that Pakistan stopped Afghan army operations against the Taliban. Therefore, the sanctuary was crucial for the insurgents; however, this does not excuse the state's consistent hesitation to confront the Taliban effectively.

A fourth line of argument emphasises the Taliban's rigid ideology of resistance. The Taliban advertised their propaganda by combining Deobandi Islamism with Pashtun honour codes to portray the Republic as a foreign puppet and depict themselves as genuine defenders of Islam (T. H. Johnson, 2017; Roy, 1994; SIGAR, 2021). This evidence passes a straw-in-the-wind test. The ideology strengthened the insurgent movement's mobilisation. However, it fails a hoop test for government behaviour. If ideology had been decisive on the Republic's side, one would expect a counter-ideological campaign. Instead, presidents reinforced the Taliban's legitimacy by calling them brothers and normalising their political role. The Republic could have advertised the Taliban's biased, radical ideology against women or human rights issues, instead of the president sympathising with the Taliban and releasing their detainees with new clothes and cash. Human rights, freedom, and women's rights could have undermined the Taliban's radical ideologies, but the presidents never talked about them. This helps explain the appeal and mobilisation of insurgents, but not the Republic's reluctance.

Therefore, by contrast, political reluctance has successfully passed a doubly decisive test. It uniquely describes the elite's behavioural practices, in which rhetorical fraternity reclassifies insurgents as kin, brothers, and fellow compatriots. Selective enforcement protected them from harm while excluding opposition. Also, aid-funded rent-seeking tends to promote accommodation rather than confrontation, though factors like incapacity, warlordism, sanctuary, and ideology also play a role in the context. In other words, the main reason that the resource-rich leaders chose inaction was ambivalence, inspired by Afghan nationalist idioms and employed in the Republic's institutional and material frameworks.

6.3 U.S. Policy Shifts: Engagement to Reluctance

The United States and the Taliban negotiations slowly spanned over three successive U.S. administrations: Barack Obama (2009-2017), Donald Trump (2017-2021), and Biden's withdrawal in 2021. It began with direct military engagement and ended in negotiations for withdrawal, driven by the high costs of war, political fatigue, and discourse on America's longest war. Finally, both parties reached an agreement that outlined the conditions for the withdrawal of U.S. troops in February 2020. Very soon, the Afghan Republic collapsed within weeks of the U.S. departure (Farley, 2021; United States Department of State, 2020).

President Barack Obama created a combined military and diplomatic strategy. In December 2009, he deployed around 30,000 additional troops to restrain the Taliban and strengthen the Afghan army (Egnell, 2011). The surge was crafted as a temporary measure to stabilise Afghanistan while training and expanding the Afghan army. At the same time, Obama and senior officials believed that winning the war was impossible and authorised exploratory diplomatic contacts with elements of the Taliban, facilitated by Qatar (Dorronsoro, 2009). However, the Taliban refused formal engagement as long as U.S. troops were present, and the Afghan government hesitated to help with reconciliation discussions that it saw as threatening its sovereignty (Gopal, 2014). These dual initiatives set the stage for negotiations but did not sustain dialogue, leaving the resolution of the conflict to future governments.

President Donald Trump shifted his war strategy for negotiations to withdraw all U.S. troops from Afghanistan because he believed that the war was unsustainable, both militarily and financially. He appointed Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan-American diplomat, to deal directly with the Taliban for an agreement. In 2020, two parties signed the Doha Agreement in Qatar, which outlined a phased withdrawal and Taliban commitments to reduce terrorism in Afghanistan and start intra-Afghan negotiations (United States Department of State, 2020). While the Afghan government was sidelined and thus lost influence over the process, the Taliban used this engagement to bolster their international legitimacy even as they escalated operations on the ground (Osimen & Newo, 2025; VOA, 2021). By mid-2021, U.S. force levels had decreased substantially, indicating that disengagement was indeed permanent.

The successive President Biden, in 2021, inherited the Doha Agreement alongside a fragile Afghan government that relied heavily on U.S. aid and military support (Murtazashvili, 2022). Despite warnings from military and intelligence officials about the Afghan army's fragility, Biden adhered to the withdrawal plan. He changed the withdrawal date from 11

September 2021 to 31 August (The White House, 2023). At the same time, the Taliban launched a nationwide offensive, very quickly capturing provincial capitals with almost no resistance. Two decades of aid dependency have built a hollow security structure that depends heavily on U.S. air power, logistics, and contractors, and once U.S. support ended, the Afghan forces disintegrated rapidly (Löfström, 2022; SIGAR, 2022c). By August 15, 2021, almost all provincial officials either fled, surrendered, or negotiated with the Taliban, allowing the Taliban to enter Kabul without resistance and bringing the Republic's twenty-year period of externally supported governance to an end (Murtazashvili, 2022; SIGAR, 2023).

Overall, from Obama's conditional engagement to Trump's deal-making diplomacy to Biden's withdrawal strategy, this transition in U.S. approaches exposed the limits of externally sustained governance in Afghanistan when Afghan politicians lacked the will to sustain peace. What started as a pragmatic effort to end the so-called "endless war" ended as a chaotic retreat. Furthermore, shifting from military action to diplomatic negotiations indicated both strategic weariness and a broader trend of political reluctance in both Washington and Kabul. For the U.S., this reluctance took the form of disengagement, prioritising unconditional withdrawal; while the Republic prioritised aid preservation over genuine security reform.

6.4 Discussion and Recommendations

The debate over Afghanistan's 2021 collapse is contentious among academics and policymakers. How could a state that received massive support for over two decades so effortlessly surrender to the Taliban? Current investigations highlight ethnic diversity, internal weaknesses, dependency, corruption, and the Taliban's resilience. However, this thesis offered a new perspective; it argued that the primary reason for the long war is "political reluctance," rooted in Pashtun ethnonationalism (Afghan nationalism), enabled by constitutional centralisation, and sustained by international assistance. This pattern was derived from the historic custom of Afghan politics, which this study terms the Muhammadzai Model of Governance (MMG), with Afghan nationalism as its guiding principle. Unlike other ethnic groups, such as the Hazaras, Tajiks, Uzbeks and marginalised Pashtun tribes who largely remained aligned to the Republic, the certain Pashtun tribes produced both sides of the conflict, the presidents and the insurgents. The conflict became complex and lengthy when co-ethnic solidarities shaped selective engagement between the Pashtun president and the Pashtun Taliban, which mitigated suppression.

In this study, political reluctance referred to a deliberate hesitation to utilise coercive strength against the Taliban, even when the state had sufficient resources for a meaningful confrontation. The Pashtun presidents' political calculations desired to accommodate their co-ethnic Taliban's survival while making aid flows under their leadership and control. However, the president may have overlooked that this status quo was inherently unsustainable, and played this risky political gamble, bypassing the U.S. and international coalition's counterinsurgency expectations. Ultimately, both presidents not only failed to gain the support of their co-ethnic insurgents but also lost the backing of the international community, which led to their abrupt withdrawal and the state's collapse. This study concludes that both Afghan presidents committed "political suicide" through their double counterinsurgency strategies.

The analysis addressed the three corresponding mechanisms: First, President's ethnonationalism sympathetically framed the Taliban as "brothers"; Second, the concentration of presidential power in the Afghan Constitution, which enabled selective appointments and enforcement with minimal accountability, often at the expense of national peace and security; and Third, the international community, especially the U.S., maintained this pattern by delivering ongoing political and financial support to the centralised Pashtun-led regime, under the belief that it would help moderate the Pashtun-led Taliban insurgency. However, in practice, aid flows nurtured both sides of the conflict, keeping it going rather than resolving it; often, the greater the international assistance, the more intense the conflict became. These political reluctance mechanisms reinforced one another, creating symbiotic economic ties between conflict adversaries, in which government elites profited from aid flows, assuming the current situation would persist, overlooking the U.S. foreign policy shift. Meanwhile, the Taliban also had access to the same resources through their shadow regime revenue scheme with impunity. This war's economic ties prolonged the conflict. It fed into U.S. narratives of "endless wars," ultimately influencing Washington's decision to negotiate directly with the Taliban and to withdraw, leaving the Republic's sudden collapse.

Building on the above, this study also presented a generalisable model of political reluctance, which fraternal discourse portrayed the insurgents as brothers or political opponents, and the elites' narrative of resisting the Taliban meant fighting between Afghan brothers for foreign interests; such discourse eroded the morale of the state forces and delegitimised the coercion. Selective enforcement translated ethnic preferences into institutional practice by favouring Pashtun elites, supplying impunity for the Taliban insurgency, exercising restraint in Pashtun-majority areas, and making non-Pashtun regions

more vulnerable to insecurity with almost no state accountability. Foreign aid nourished the Republic's MMG structure through funnelling international assistance into a rentier state. This condition developed a self-perpetuating cycle in which rhetoric diminished the ethical justification for the adequate use of coercion, institutions became accustomed to inaction, and aid became the opponents' income, ultimately prolonging the conflict rather than resolving it.

Empirical evidence supports this interpretation. For example, several SIGAR reports from 2019, 2021, and 2022 showed that the President restricted some military operations in Pashtun provinces, despite the available capability. They also mentioned that the Afghan state frequently released Taliban prisoners, which in some cases exceeded 5,000 in 2020, with many of those released rejoining the Taliban. In addition, despite massive U.S. security aid, the actual number of Afghan troops remained unclear due to payroll fraud, including "ghost soldiers". These results are due not only to incapacity but also to deliberate measures driven by ethnonational and ideological preferences linked to the MMG. Process tracing tests also support these findings: if incapacity were the primary driver of insurgency, it would be unnecessary for explicit presidential directives to restrict states' coercion, whereas such directives are documented and have passed the "hoop test." The critical evidence coming from the rhetoric and decrees, for example, Karzai's repeated speeches and interviews in the media in which he explicitly mentioned the Taliban were "brothers," and similarly Ghani's mass prisoner releases, cannot be solely explained by corruption or foreign interference, such as Pakistani sanctuaries. These efforts clearly reflect how the leadership was ambivalent to confront the Taliban in a meaningful way, stemming from ethnic politics and weak governance that tend to prefer ethnic solidarity over the state's national interest.

There are three key lessons from Afghanistan's collapse in 2021. First, if current scholarship delves more deeply beyond factors such as ethnic diversity, weak institutions, military incapacity, corruption, foreign sanctuary, and so on, the collapse would be more likely to be considered preventable. It is because, unlike non-Pashtun ethnic groups, such as the Hazaras, Tajiks, and Uzbeks as well as marginalised Pashtun tribes, who had minimal participation in decision-making, they largely remained aligned to the Pashtun-led Republic. Conversely, the certain Pashtun tribes provided both the president, who governed, and the insurgents who eventually overthrew the government. So, the collapse stemmed from co-ethnic elite strategies embedded within the tradition of MMG that characterised the Republic. Second, it shows that ethnonationalism can severely deteriorate state-building even under extensive international support and oversight. Afghan elites, inspired by Afghan nationalism and to avoid

the risk of alienating their ethnic bases, consciously restricted effective confrontation against Taliban fighters, especially in Pashtun-majority provinces. Such biased measures undermined genuine counterinsurgency efforts, decreased military morale, and enabled the Taliban to expand. Third, these lessons learnt from Afghanistan case could help enhance comprehension of the limitations of foreign intervention in state-building in contexts where local political actors prioritise ethnocentrism and regime survival over national interest. However, it is important to consider that it is not always externally imposed structures are bound to collapse. Afghanistan was created by British India in 1880, and since then, Afghanistan has had an imposed construct rather than an authentic state. However, it is not a universal law that every country with an imposed construct is bound to collapse; Afghanistan is not unique in this regard. After World War II, both Japan and Germany were under externally imposed political orders, and many newly decolonised states emerged under international pressure and foreign-designed constitutional frameworks. Beyond Japan and Germany, numerous other countries have seen their postwar or post-colonial states shaped by significant foreign intervention. For example, South Korea, Iraq, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, East Timor, Cambodia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Namibia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo all underwent state-building processes under substantial external guidance or supervision. What made Afghanistan especially vulnerable to collapse was competition among certain Pashtun tribes. Historically, British India supported the Mohammadzai Kandahari tribes over other Pashtun tribes, including the Ghilzai tribes. Each time the Pashtun Ghilzai tribes found opportunities, they challenged the order—for example, the communist regime was Ghilzai-led, and then the Taliban had its main base among the Ghilzai. Later in 2001, the U.S. supported Popalzai Kandahari Mr Karzai, whom the Taliban challenged. After Karzai, Ghani Ahmadzai, a Pashtun from the eastern Ghilzai tribes, provoked Taliban leaders who were mainly Kandahari, and Karzai undermined Ghani's government in hopes of returning power to Kandahar. Therefore, the U.S. lost itself among Pashtun tribal competition over power and resources and ultimately became just another "U.S. Zai" tribe among them.

The results suggest that elites' behaviours during the Republic were deeply influenced by Afghan nationalism, an ideology historically tied to Pashtun dominance. Also, the MMG institutionalised exclusionary practices, embedding conflict within the very structure of the Afghan state. As a result, decision-making at the highest levels was characterised by ambivalence, ambiguity, and paralysis. Placing the Karzai and Ghani presidencies in the context of Afghan nationalism shows that this hesitation was not just due to weak leadership

but a core element of Afghan governance. It stems from ethnic identity, centralised institutions, and reliance on external support. The findings also show that the MMG, through its Afghan nationalist principles, blended Afghanism (ethnic-Pashtun identity) with Islamism (religious legitimacy) and played a key role in the puzzle of recurring collapses and ongoing conflicts in modern Afghan history. This ideological fusion marginalised non-Pashtun identities as a whole, divided Pashtun tribes internally, obstructed the formation of a unifying national consciousness, weakened institutional legitimacy, and deepened social fragmentation. Afghan nationalism has created division rather than unity, aligning loyalists with the rulers of a single tribal ethnic and religious state. To break the cycle of conflict, exclusion, and collapse, and steer towards a civilised, inclusive, peaceful, and resilient nation, Afghanistan should dismantle the MMG, build inclusive political institutions, and replace ethnic (Afghan) nationalism with civic nationalism that emphasises citizenship, equality, active participation, diversity, and collective accountability. Civic nationalism legitimises the state through public support and the rule of law rather than through nepotism, tribal links, or sectarian ties. It restores Afghanistan's national identity, grounded in democratic values.

A constitutional framework rooted in civic nationalism and parliamentarism would institutionalise inclusivity, limit the monopolisation of power, and foster horizontal accountability among the branches of government. A parliamentary system endorsed by at least two national political parties representing all ethnic groups would lay the groundwork for inclusive representation; these parties should choose neutral names to help citizens connect with their policies and principles rather than focus on their ethnic or religious origins. Removing undemocratic structures, such as the Loya Jirga, and decentralising administrative authority would further break the hold of power monopolisation. In addition, all national symbols, such as the flag, anthem, and official terminology, should reflect the identities of all ethnic groups, highlight equality and diversity, and celebrate a shared history and destiny. To respect religious freedom and prevent the elites from using Islam as a political instrument, secular institutions are the most practical way to promote Islam as a moral guide and bond of unity among all ethnic groups, regardless of their religious context. Recruitment and human resource policies in all branches of government, especially in executive positions, should also be subject to anti-ethnic rotation policies to promote fair representation. Furthermore, international organisations, such as the United Nations, can enhance transparency during critical political transitions in Afghanistan.

The examination also reveals that post-2001 U.S. state-building efforts reinforced the MMG by empowering ethnically dominant individuals rather than institutions. Indeed, U.S. state-building created a network of self-interested elites rather than inclusive, accountable, and civic institutions; likewise, it embedded an undemocratic institution, such as the Loya Jirga, within a nominally democratic framework and constrained political pluralism. These contradictions resulted in a false democracy that reinforced corruption, centralised power, and increased ethnic polarisation. Similarly, international actors backed a rentier state that prioritised short-term objectives and elite interests over institutional accountability and sustainable governance reform. Future international intervention should therefore move away from symbolic unity to the development of accountable, rule-based institutions rather than personalised power structures. The intervention should prioritise an independent judiciary, a dynamic civil society, and a professional media capable of collectively holding authority to account. Foreign aid should promote citizen-oriented policies rather than donor-driven responsibility, supporting host governance rather than substituting for it. Ultimately, sustainable peace in multi-ethnic societies such as Afghanistan requires a powerful transition from ethnic and religious nationalism towards civic nationalism, the rule of law, and inclusive citizenship. Replacing Afghanism and Islamism with civic principles would create a stronger national political institution, where legitimacy depends on public backing and participation instead of lineage or sectarian identity. Afghanistan can only start to develop a lasting national identity that supports peace, pluralism, and democracy by fostering civic nationalism.

Moving forward, addressing the underlying causes of Afghanistan's conflict and state failure requires dismantling the tradition of MMG and building an inclusive civic framework that emphasises equality, citizenship, and collective participation. Afghan nationalism should be substituted with civic nationalism. A parliamentary system backed by strong national political parties could better serve inclusivity and representation. Political institutions that prioritise citizenship over ethnicity and participation over patronage are essential for achieving sustainable peace. Thus, there should be further interdisciplinary research into the development of practical frameworks for transitioning from mono-ethnic to pluralistic and civil governance. This requires investigating constitutional design, integrating diversity and decentralisation, and embedding pluralism in the reconstruction of Afghanistan as an inclusive nationhood.

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