

Building Local Government in Afghanistan

It will need public support
by LT Daniel R. Green, USN

One of the central challenges in Afghanistan has been building a viable government at the provincial level that can compete with the Taliban's political program. While security conditions have long been a limiting factor to the establishment of an effective government in many parts of the country, Afghanistan's history of a decentralized or nonexistent state has also complicated the task. Good governance efforts have been further hindered by Afghanistan's high illiteracy rates, formidable terrain, and lack of trained civil servants. While resource and security constraints have proven to be the greatest hindrances to building a viable and dynamic government at the local level, poor governance practices by district and provincial officials have often alienated the population against their own government. In many cases, population groups have aligned with the Taliban out of frustration because of the predatory behavior of government officials whose actions often include the arbitrary killing of residents and the theft of personal property, among other abuses. Additionally, some practices of the coalition forces have also hindered good governance at the local level, such as turning a blind eye to these abuses, getting captured by public officials and not engaging the general population in operations, and unwittingly promoting corruption through poor contracting processes, among other factors. Even with all of these challenges, it is possible to build

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"I believe that government starts at the bottom and moves upward, for government exists for the welfare of the masses of the nation."

***—Philippine President Ramon Magsaysay,
who successfully defeated the Huk Communist insurgency in the Philippines in the 1950s***

"You must know something about strategy and tactics and logistics, but also economics and politics and diplomacy and history. You must know everything you can about military power, and you must also understand the limits of military power. You must understand that few of the problems of our time have been solved by military power alone."

***—President John F. Kennedy,
7 June 1961,
U.S. Naval Academy Commencement***

a local government that the population supports and that addresses most of their needs. This central pillar of effective counterinsurgency, of building a viable state in the countryside that can compete with the Taliban's political program, is essential to victory. It won't be easy, but to paraphrase GEN David H. Petraeus, hard is not hopeless.

Building a Dynamic Provincial Government

Afghanistan's provincial governments consist of a number of elements that loosely correspond to executive, legislative, and judiciary branch functions as well as district elements that largely derive their sources of authority and capabilities from the provincial government. Each province has a governor appointed by the central government who presides over a provincial administration principally consisting of nine directors who administer directorates and manage programs that correspond with the central government's various ministries. An elected provincial council serves as an advisory body to the governor and the provincial directorates and was democratically elected in 2009. The judiciary typically handles cases that pertain to individual matters and is not usually involved in disputes among and between elements of the

provincial government. While all provinces have a governor, provincial directors, and provincial councils, significant shortfalls exist in other areas of civil administration around the country where not all provinces have a viable judiciary, trained civil servants, or even physical infrastructure for a capable provincial government. Though these challenges limit the ability of the provincial government to actively promote a political program that can compete with the Taliban's political agenda, some aspects of the Afghan constitution inhibit provincial governments from being as responsive to the population's needs as the situation would require.

Afghanistan's "democracy deficit" at the provincial level inhibits the creation of a dynamic government able to address the concerns of the people. Because provincial governors are appointed by the central government, and are thus indirectly accountable to the people they ostensibly lead, and often lack direct budget authority and the ability to hire and fire local directors, they are ever mindful of maintaining political connections in Kabul and do not have to be overly concerned with local sentiment. Because the people are unable to hold corrupt or ineffective provincial officials accountable, outside of utilizing contacts in Kabul that most communities

lack, they often turn to the Taliban to address injustices or to "right the balance" of accountability at the local level. Furthermore, this system of government encourages corruption because accountability and responsibility are disconnected, and lacking a viable judiciary and a political party system, local residents have no realistic way of addressing complaints. While the state is quite weak in many areas, it is too strong in others where the central government has so much authority that local initiative is often stymied because provincial officials must secure the central government's approval for actions that rightfully should fall within the discretion of community leaders. Though these various constitutional and legislative restrictions limit the ability of local government to provide a dynamic alternative to the Taliban's political program, they do not necessarily limit local officials from exercising many of the democratic functions and exhibiting some of the democratic values that address the demands of the local population.¹

Good Governance and Legitimacy

There are at least three key aspects to provincial government that members of the military should focus on in building local government and determining its quality. The concepts of legitimacy, capacity, and efficacy generally capture most aspects of government that units will encounter in Afghanistan. All three of these ideas blend in to one another to varying degrees, so the behavior of public officials will often exhibit some or all of these aspects. Legitimacy can be defined as lawfully and rightfully acquired public power. It is as much an event (e.g., an election) as it is a process. If a legitimate leader regularly violates the human rights of the population and local residents have no ability to seek redress, then the leader's legitimacy may begin to wane. Democratic values, such as respect for human rights and representation, enhance a leader's legitimacy and are especially important when there are few formal limits to the power of the government. Additionally, because governors are not elected, representative



The local authorities must be able to compete with the Taliban. (Photo by GSgt William Price.)

behavior is especially important among executive leaders because marginalized groups don't have recourse at the ballot box to express their frustrations and may, if they are habitually excluded, eventually see local government as illegitimate if their grievances go unanswered.

However, a key distinction must be made between legitimacy versus popularity. Poor governance choices can still occur even when there is strong legitimacy. Each resident and public official has rights and responsibilities, and where those rights are systematically violated and where public responsibilities are not exercised causing serious harm to the population, legitimacy weakens, and local residents may either stop supporting the government or, conversely, engage with the Taliban against it. Leaders of military units, provincial reconstruction teams, and district support teams in Afghanistan should focus on gathering the following information when assessing the legitimacy and good governance practices of local public officials, including tribal leaders.

- Regularly convenes and actively participates in shuras and jirgas with the community to address issues of public concern. Seeks to include members of all tribal groups, factions, civil society, and geographic location.
- Generally responds positively to public criticism of actions and is seen to respond to suggestions from the representative group(s).
- Provides competent leadership on issues of public concern and seeks to address and solve problems in the community.
- Exhibits noncorrupt behavior and does not tolerate it in other public officials. Operates in a nonpredatory manner toward the local population.
- Endeavors to govern through formal institutions and brings together representative groups and provincial directorates to achieve common goals.
- Has established a stable government that regularly addresses public concerns.
- Seeks to connect the people to their government through regular state-



Gathering information about public opinion helps assess the legitimacy of public officials. (Photo by Cpl Daniel Blatter.)

ments and engagements and publicly speaks out against the insurgency.

Building a Capable Government

The capacity of a provincial government is its ability to plan, implement, and sustain the programs and policies of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA). At a very basic level, capacity measurements should focus on physical infrastructure, equipment, personnel, and planning procedures. In general terms, much of this is addressed by filling a provincial government's tashkil, which is the table of organization for local civil servants. But filling a tashkil is not sufficient to have a capable government and will not realistically be completed for some time due to the low levels of education of much of the Afghan population. An assessment of the physical infrastructure of a provincial directorate, for example, should focus on whether it has a headquarters; whether it has power and basic security, such as a wall; and whether it has office furniture and supplies, as well as determining whether it has similar structures at the district level.

The next factor to focus on would be whether the directorate has the equipment one would normally associate with that government entity, such as, for example, seeds, tractors, storage

facilities, and farm implements for the Directorate of Agriculture. The issue of personnel includes not only whether they have employees who work at the government entity but also whether they are literate, trained in their profession, and regularly attend their jobs. Analysis of this subject can also include a focus on whether there is evidence of specialization and hierarchy (e.g., rank differentiation) and whether personnel are also in a province's districts or conduct activities there.

Planning procedures do not necessarily have a physical aspect to them outside of dedicated meeting facilities, but they represent the highest form of organizational capacity because they typically involve literacy, information gathering, prioritization, community engagement, and implementation. Evidence of these kinds of things can be seen through regularly scheduled meetings with representatives of GIROA and coalition forces, dedicated secretarial staff to capture meeting notes, following up on tasks or requests for information from prior meetings, and regular attendance at these meetings, as well as evidence of follow-on behavior from decisions arrived at by the meeting's participants.

On an individual level, a leader's capacity to govern can be seen by his abil-

ity to initiate solutions to problems and collaborate with other elements of the provincial government and members of civil society on common problems, having an agenda for meetings and holding people accountable, and taking public criticism, among a host of other leadership qualities. Additionally, a government official's capacity can also be determined by his level of education, prior government or management experience, and a willingness to engage in behavior that reinforces positive administration, such as inclusiveness, accountability, responsibility, and steadiness in decisionmaking.

- Has GIRoA appointed an official to the position of public responsibility?
- Is the official literate, trained, and knowledgeable about his responsibilities?
- Does he appear to be competent in accomplishing his tasks?
- Does the governmental entity have a headquarters with power, a security wall, and basic supplies, such as desks, chairs, office supplies?
- Does the governmental entity possess those things one would naturally expect them to have based upon their responsibilities (e.g., seeds, fertilizer, and tractors for the Directorate of Agriculture)?
- Are there employees of the governmental entity (e.g., directorate, courts, etc.)?
- Do they receive a regular salary?
- Are they literate, trained, and knowledgeable about their responsibilities?
- Is there evidence of hierarchy at the governmental entity (e.g., different uniforms)?
- Do they have a process of collecting inputs from the community, processing them, and acting on them in a consistent manner?
- Are there regular planning meetings that are well organized and lead to decisions being made and eventually followed up on?

Making Governance Effective

The efficacy of a provincial govern-

ment is a measurement of its accomplishment of those objectives it is responsible to implement. Regardless of a local government's legitimacy and its capacity to do things, absent evidence of action, it is largely irrelevant to the local population. Evidence of this behavior can be seen by whether leaders follow up on the decisions of the local government, such as whether an agreed upon project was in fact finished. But efficacy is not only the physical completion of things, it is also about processes, such as whether the provincial governor regularly convenes shuras or jirgas with the population to solicit feedback from the community to whether legal cases are acted upon by

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local judicial authorities. A crucial feature of efficacy is the stability of decisionmaking and public administration. Can the people rely upon local government to address the usual concerns of the population in a consistent and reliable manner? As much as local residents seek stability in terms of security, they also seek it from their local government in doing such mundane things as picking up the garbage to more serious endeavors, such as educating children and adjudicating disputes.

- Does the provincial government operate outside of the provincial capital?
- Does the governmental entity accomplish those things it would naturally be held responsible for accomplishing (e.g., improving roads, cleaning drainage ditches, hearing cases, and making decisions, etc.)?
- Are there feedback mechanisms involved in the actions of the provincial

government that allow communities to alter the implementation of programs if required?

- Does the provincial government initiate contact with the central government to address problems at the provincial level (e.g., resource shortfalls, etc.)?
- Does the provincial government evenly implement programs irrespective of tribe, faction, civil society membership, and geographic location?
- Are government programs and projects evaluated for quality control, and is accountability for standard or corrupt work enforced?
- Does the provincial government collaborate with other elements of the local government in accomplishing public objectives?

How Do We Build Governance?

Because of the democracy deficit at the local level, the ability of residents to enforce accountability, responsibility, and representation on local government officials is limited absent certain constitutional reforms. For this reason, putting the Afghan Government in the lead is not sufficient to address these concerns, and we cannot abdicate our responsibility to actively participate in the governance practices of local government where they fail. The self-limiting nature of Afghan sovereignty should not entirely prohibit certain actions on our part because sovereignty is a flexible concept, especially when it is being established for the first time in an area and when existing government structures are not serving the people. For this reason, much of our efforts should focus on facilitating and coordinating good governance practices and providing consistent leadership to key Afghan officials with an eye to stabilizing governance structures. Some of these activities may simply mean providing a ride for an official to a meeting to helping him write up meeting notes to providing him personal protection so that the insurgency cannot assassinate him. It may also include initiating anticorruption efforts to sideline or re-

move certain public officials. Additionally, military units may need to coach, teach, and mentor local leaders and provide forums for different groups to meet, such as a shura or jirga meeting with a district chief and key directors. While civil affairs teams have typically focused on building physical infrastructure, such as buildings, electricity, and roads, as well as short-term humanitarian assistance, it is equally, if not more, important that they focus on the human capital needs of local officials. Long-term literacy and training programs need to be initiated in cooperation with the Afghan Civil Service Commission that will survive beyond one particular unit's rotation. These programs are essential to establishing a viable government presence in Afghanistan's countryside.

In order to build governance at the local level it is essential that a dedicated team focus on this responsibility to the exclusion of all other tasks. In many areas this may be impossible since a maneuver unit may only be present and civilian interagency partners are absent, but if it is possible it should be attempted. The "governance team" should have dedicated civil affairs, intelligence, communications, force protection, and interagency components organized into a cross-functional unit. Ideally, a provincial reconstruction team or a district support team is close by to perform many of these functions provided they are partnered with a civil affairs team. The real challenge is having dedicated intelligence support to the effort to collect and analyze governance information in support of good governance efforts. The recent creation of the Information Dominance Center at International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Joint Command and stability operations information centers at the regional commands in Afghanistan are good first starting points to collecting, analyzing, and using this sort of information and are fed and supplemented by the tactical conflict assessment planning framework and human terrain teams. However, much of this type of information is only really



They have low expectations of their government. We have to help them get the basics right.
(Photo by Sgt Dean Davis.)

known at the local level by the unit that is best placed to collect it; that is why it is so important to take the initiative to organize it at the tactical level. As local human terrain information is collected and tribal settlement patterns, key personalities, issues of local dispute, and the recent history of the area are determined, it is important to conduct an assessment of the state of local government using the questions previously listed. These questions will allow establishment of a base line of the level of development of local government and will allow prioritization of initiatives and focus of efforts.

Establishing local government is as much an event as it is a process and requires consistent work spanning the rotations of numerous military units. At its best, government is a stabilizing force in a community because it truly serves the people. The Afghan population has very low expectations about their government due to its past behavior, corruption, or the simple fact that they have never had a government. Getting the basics right, such as having a competent district chief, a largely representative shura or jirga, and some modicum of service delivery tied to these institutions, will exceed most of the expectations of the people. Building upon this very basic unit of gov-

ernment will take time, and the Taliban will challenge it through assassinations, murder, intimidation campaigns, and capitalizing on poor governance decisions. This political strategy of confronting the insurgency is essential to providing the population a positive future that represents their needs and eliminates those fissures in society the Taliban use to divide the people from their government. Population protection alone is not sufficient to win the hearts and minds of the people; positive administration and a dynamic local government are just as important. The work can be frustrating and hard at times, but since it is in the service of a people desperately interested in having a life without violence, it is worth it because it is the key to our success in the war in Afghanistan.

Note

1. An earlier version of this paragraph was published in "Defeating the Taliban's Political Program," *Armed Forces Journal*, November 2009, pp. 18–21, 36–37.

