

Why State-Building Failed in Afghanistan

Internal weaknesses and external missteps

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Abstract

International community intervention in Afghanistan led by the US in 2001 ignited hope among Afghan citizens and other countries for a democratic, inclusive, and stable government. These all vanished in 2021 when the US-led army announced its evacuation, ultimately leading to the resurgence of the Taliban. Many scholars argue that the international community failed in Afghanistan and believe it was a shortcoming and failure of the international community. However, this essay argues that the intervention's shortcomings were not solely the fault of external actors but also stemmed from systemic internal failures of weak governance, corruption, and societal cohesion. Through critical analysis of existing literature and government structure, this letter examines the factors that contributed to the failure of state-building in Afghanistan.

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Keywords

State-building Failure, Afghanistan, Extractive Institutions, Centralization of Power, Corruption and Legitimacy, International Intervention, Donor-driven Governance, U.S.-Taliban Negotiations, Customary Governance, Institutional Fragility, Parallel Governance Structures, Taliban Resurgence.

Why State-Building Failed in Afghanistan

Internal weaknesses and external missteps

Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan ended on 15 August 2021. That afternoon, President Ashraf Ghani fled the capital city by helicopter to neighboring Uzbekistan. Just days earlier, he had sworn never to leave and said that he would die before abandoning his people. When Ghani fled, the Taliban offensive, which had captured many provincial centers in the preceding weeks, easily entered Kabul and sat comfortably in the presidential chair.

According to John F. Sopko, the US spent \$146 billion over 20 years trying to rebuild Afghanistan. After spending this huge amount of money and time, the Afghan republic collapsed so completely and quickly, even before the 31 August 2021 withdrawal deadline, incentivizing thousands of people to run desperately to Kabul airport, aiming to escape the Taliban's harsh rule and potential retribution. Researchers attributed many reasons to the international community and the Afghan government for the failure of the stated building in Afghanistan.

Many well-grounded reasons justify the shortcomings of international intervention in the state-building process in Afghanistan. First, the international community focused on community-level engagement, often overlooking the existence and efficacy of customary governance systems that had persisted and adapted over time. Second, international donors quickly began to build parallel structures to get around the lethargic and dysfunctional governance structures that they had helped to put in place. Third, excluding the Afghan government from the US- Taliban talks weakened and undermined the republic.

At the same time, this failure was driven by a combination of structural flaws and leadership failures, which collectively weakened the state's stability and legitimacy. The High Level of Centralization not only proved to be a catalyst for a broader and more violent competition for power but also failed to answer the contemporary needs of the Afghan community with diverse ethnicities. Second, President Ghani governed through a highly selective, narrow circle of loyalists, destabilizing the government at a critical juncture. Third, the Afghan government lost legitimacy in the eyes of its people.

This paper tends to contribute to the existing literature by answering why state-building in Afghanistan was unsuccessful. To answer this question, this research employs a qualitative, case study methodology to analyze the failure of state-building in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021. The study draws on a range of primary and secondary sources, including government reports, academic literature, policy evaluations, and expert interviews, to examine the interplay between internal and external factors that contributed to institutional fragility and eventual state collapse.

1 Literature review: theoretical approaches to state fragility and state-building

Understanding Afghanistan's state-building trajectory requires situating the case within broader debates on why states fail. Scholars generally identify two major clusters of explanations: internal institutional

dynamics and external or international influences. The first emphasizes governance structures, elite behavior, and the distribution of political power, while the second focuses on the role of foreign intervention, international aid, and externally driven reform agendas.

Firstly, the internal causes of Afghanistan's state-building failure are rooted in the extractive and exclusionary nature of its governance institutions. Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) argue that extractive institutions, where power is centralized and political participation is restricted, undermine state resilience and foster instability. This pattern was evident in the Afghan Republic, where President Ghani's administration marginalized key ethnic and political stakeholders, contributing to elite fragmentation and declining public trust (Sadr, 2021). Electoral dysfunction, particularly the disputed 2019 presidential election, further weakened legitimacy, as documented by Thomas Ruttig (2019) and Scott DesMarais (2019). Furthermore, the failure to build governance from the local level upward alienated much of the population. Murtazashvili (2020, 2022) highlights that traditional governance systems, such as *jirgas*, enjoyed far greater legitimacy than the formal state but were systematically excluded. These dynamics, centralization, exclusion, corruption, and weakened legitimacy, created a brittle political order unable to withstand the Taliban's final offensive.

Secondly, externally, international actors contributed to institutional fragility by constructing parallel governance structures that bypassed Afghan authorities. Ghani and Lockhart (2008) criticize donor-driven development for undermining sovereignty by channeling funds through contractors and short-term projects rather than Afghan institutions. This dynamic was evident in the National Solidarity Programme (NSP), which, despite developmental intentions, often reinforced top-down structures and sidelined local leadership (Beath, Fotini & Enikolopov, 2011; Murtazashvili, 2020). King and Samii (2014) similarly argue that externally imposed "fast-track" reforms tend to empower elites and reinforce corruption, patterns clearly observable in Afghanistan's post-2001 state-building experience. Large-scale failures in the energy sector, such as the Tarakhil Power Plant, underscore the persistent disconnect between donor priorities and local needs (Amin & Bernell, 2018). Most critically, the exclusion of the Afghan government from the 2020 U.S.-Taliban negotiations dealt a severe blow to the Republic's legitimacy (Joscelyn & Roggio, 2020; Sopko, 2023), signaling to many Afghans that their government lacked sovereignty and long-term viability.

The literature reviewed above points to two broad categories of causal factors, internal institutional weaknesses and external international pressures, that have shaped Afghanistan's political trajectory. However, to analyze how these mechanisms interacted in practice and how they contributed specifically to the failure of Afghanistan's state-building project, a structured conceptual framework is needed. The following section bridges these theoretical debates with the specific variables examined in this study.

2 Conceptual framework: explaining the failure of state-building in Afghanistan

This paper adopts a conceptual framework that explains Afghanistan's state-building failure as the product of an interactive relationship between internal institutional weaknesses and externally imposed governance dynamics. The dependent variable - state-building failure - refers to the Afghan government's inability to maintain legitimacy, territorial control, and sustainable institutions between 2001 and 2021. The first set of independent variables consists of internal institutional weaknesses: highly centralized and extractive political structures that concentrated authority in Kabul, excluded key ethnic and political groups, and fostered corruption, elite fragmentation, and declining public trust. Leadership failures under President Ghani deepened these institutional problems by isolating allies, weakening checks and balances, and eroding cohesion within the political elite. The second set of independent variables consists of external governance dynamics, particularly donor-driven development

models that bypassed Afghan ministries, the heavy dependence on foreign aid that undermined accountability, the neglect of indigenous governance mechanisms such as jirgas, and the exclusion of the Afghan government from the U.S.-Taliban peace negotiations. The framework argues that Afghanistan's collapse cannot be attributed to internal or external factors alone; rather, it resulted from their mutually reinforcing interaction. Internal weaknesses made the state dependent on foreign support, while external interventions amplified domestic fragility, creating a brittle political order that ultimately failed once external backing diminished.

This framework seeks to test the following hypothesis:

The failure of state-building in Afghanistan was primarily caused by the interaction between centralized, exclusionary domestic institutions and externally imposed, parallel governance systems that eroded legitimacy and prevented sustainable institution-building.

This hypothesis guides the subsequent analysis, which examines how internal governance failures and externally driven development practices jointly contributed to the collapse of the Afghan state.

3 Analysis

3.1 The internal case of failure

While these internal dynamics reveal why the Afghan state was inherently brittle, they do not fully explain the speed and scale of its collapse. The centralization of power, exclusion of key stakeholders, and entrenched corruption created a political order that lacked both legitimacy and societal roots, but these weaknesses became fatal only when they interacted with pressures originating outside the state apparatus. Thus, understanding the failure of state-building in Afghanistan requires moving beyond internal institutional flaws to examine how external interventions, donor-driven governance models, and international diplomatic choices compounded these vulnerabilities. It is this interaction, rather than internal factors alone, that ultimately produced a state incapable of resisting the Taliban's final advance.

3.2 President Ghani's politics

President Ghani was isolated from voices and opinions beyond his handpicked inner circle of confidants. Under President Ghani, only a handful of advisors wielded any real power, according to former officials. For example, Hekmat Karzai told SIGAR that "the entire government of Afghanistan was run by six people." The extent to which President Ghani's isolation and tendency toward micromanagement caused the collapse of his government is difficult to discern in a complex political environment. However, it appears to have destabilized the Republic by undermining support for the administration among slighted powerbrokers and constituencies and limiting the president's knowledge of critical information, hampering effective decision-making (Sopko, 2023, p. 10).

The net effect was a leader who was largely ignorant of the reality confronting the country he led. Journalist Charlotte Bellis, who was in Kabul at the time of the collapse in August 2021 and who had contact with a range of Afghan officials, described a culture of obliviousness within the Ghani administration. Some officials were hosting parties in the weeks before the collapse, unaware of what

was unfolding around them, Bellis told SIGAR. Meanwhile, President Ghani seemed to be conducting business as usual. Hekmat Karzai told SIGAR, “For God’s sake, we had provinces falling, and [Ghani] would still bloody hold National Procurement Council meetings for 4 hours. He would hold urban planning meetings while we had districts falling. I mean, the guy had completely wrong priorities on so many different levels.” Vicki Aken, the International Rescue Committee’s Afghanistan Country Director, told SIGAR that the atmosphere was “like Nero fiddling while Rome is burning.” (Sopko, 2023, p. 11). Critics charged that Ghani was wasting time micromanaging decisions that should have belonged to the ministries. Just a week before Kabul fell to the Taliban, Ghani famously convened his National Procurement Commission to grant permission for a dam to be built in Kunduz Province, even though Kunduz by then was no longer under government control (Murtazashvili, 2022, p. 49).

President Ghani viewed regional powerbrokers, many of whom were ethnic minorities from the north, as impediments to his vision of a centralized, technocratic state. Soon after assuming office, he moved to undermine their influence by removing the warlord governors appointed during the Karzai era and replacing them with loyalists, often Pashtuns from the south and east. These appointments, particularly in northern provinces, frequently triggered protests and unrest (Murtazashvili, 2022, p. 50). Initially, Ghani drew from the country’s educated youth to build his administration, but as his leadership became increasingly authoritarian, many of these professionals resigned. In his final years in office, Ghani relied on a shrinking inner circle composed mainly of two advisors, chief of staff Fazel Fazly and national security advisor Hamdullah Mohib, earning them the moniker “the Republic of Three.” Rather than prioritize governance or the fight against the Taliban, Ghani became preoccupied with neutralizing former mujahideen commanders who opposed him. Although he succeeded in weakening these figures, this strategy ultimately backfired. The warlords, particularly in the north, had served as a buffer against the Taliban. As their influence waned, Taliban forces advanced with little resistance. By early 2021, the Afghan government controlled only about 30 percent of the country, and between May and August of that year, district after district fell, many without a fight (Murtazashvili, 2022, p. 50).

Acemoglu and Robinson, in *Why Nations Fail*, highlight Spanish colonial rule in Latin America as a case of centralized, extractive governance that excluded local leaders, leading to instability and weak post-independence institutions. The Spanish crown ruled through distant administrators, relying on forced labor and failing to integrate local governance, which resulted in revolts and long-term institutional fragility (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012). Similarly, Ghani’s government in Afghanistan centralized power, sidelining tribal leaders and warlords, while the Taliban built grassroots support. Like the Spanish colonial system, Ghani’s exclusionary approach led to a loss of legitimacy, military collapse, and ultimately, the downfall of his government.

3.3 High level of centralized and exclusive institutions

The Bonn Conference, convened in late 2001, established a process for the construction of a new political order in Afghanistan that involved democratic elections and the adoption of a new constitution. Forged between various factions of the Afghan polity, the agreement that emerged from Bonn centralized power in the Afghan presidency. However, investing so much power in the executive raised the stakes for political competition by limiting the channels through which diverse constituencies could be represented in government. As Colin Jackson, former deputy assistant secretary of Defense for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia, wrote in 2017, “Whereas Western powers and Afghan modernizers assumed that political participation would release pressure and stabilize the system, such mobilization proved to be a catalyst for a broader and more violent competition for power.” The result exacerbated long-running tensions between an urban elite eager to modernize and conservative rural populations distrustful of central governance (Sopko, 2023, p. 11).

During Ashraf Ghani's second term (2019–2021), Afghanistan's institutions became increasingly extractive, leading to the collapse of the government. According to *Why Nations Fail*, extractive institutions are characterized by the concentration of power in a small elite that prioritizes personal control over broad-based governance (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012). Ghani's administration exemplified this by centralizing power within a small circle of technocrats, sidelining traditional powerbrokers, warlords, and even his government officials. This approach mirrored historical cases in the book, such as the decline of the Ottoman Empire, where excessive centralization and exclusion of local elites weakened the state's ability to govern effectively. By marginalizing figures like Abdul Rashid Dostum and Atta Mohammad Noor, Ghani created resentment among Afghanistan's political elite, leading to a lack of coordinated resistance when the Taliban launched their final offensive.

In *Why Nations Fail*, Acemoglu and Robinson emphasize how leaders weaken institutions to centralize power, ensuring their prolonged rule at the expense of democracy and governance. A striking example is Alberto Fujimori, the former president of Peru, who systematically dismantled independent institutions to consolidate his control. Upon assuming power in 1990, Fujimori staged a self-coup (*autogolpe*) in 1992, dissolving the Peruvian Congress and assuming legislative powers. He then restructured the judiciary, removing independent judges and replacing them with loyalists who would not challenge his authority. In doing so, he eroded checks and balances, making the judiciary an extension of his rule (Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012). Similarly, Ashraf Ghani in Afghanistan took steps to weaken the Independent Commission for Supervision of the Implementation of the Constitution (ICSIC) by first undermining its authority and later transferring constitutional interpretation powers to the Supreme Court, which was under his influence. Like Fujimori, Ghani sought to ensure that no institution could challenge his decisions, effectively neutralizing any opposition from within the state (Sadr, 2021, p. 72).

3.4 Lost legitimacy

Endemic corruption, including recurring electoral manipulation and exploitative practices by state officials, severely weakened the Afghan government. The centralized structure of the state allowed the executive branch to operate with minimal oversight from the judiciary or legislature. According to Ikram Afzali, Executive Director of Integrity Watch Afghanistan, government bodies shifted from serving the public to facilitating corruption and protecting elite interests. This deterioration in public trust made it harder for the government to mobilize resistance against insurgents. Richard Holbrooke, former U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, warned in 2009 that such corruption was a powerful recruitment tool for the Taliban. As Afghan officials continued to misuse their authority and convert state institutions into platforms for organized crime, and with no real accountability, the government's legitimacy crumbled (Sopko, 2023, p. 12).

Furthermore, electoral legitimacy was another crucial factor that undermined Ghani's government. The disputed 2019 presidential election resulted in two parallel governments, with Ghani's rival, Abdullah Abdullah, refusing to accept the outcome (Ruttig, 2019). This political instability was similar to the situations described in *Why Nations Fail*, such as the power struggles in colonial Latin America, where elite fragmentation led to weak institutions and eventual state failure. The inability of the Afghan government to present a unified front weakened its credibility both domestically and internationally, making it difficult to build a sustainable peace process or a long-term strategy for governance.

John F. Sopko reported that more than half of the Afghan government's budget was funded by international donor grants, amounting to at least \$8.6 billion annually for both security and civilian aid. When both on-budget and off-budget support were included, foreign aid accounted for nearly 80% of Afghanistan's total \$11 billion public spending. Murtazashvili contends that this heavy dependence on external funding, coupled with a central government answerable primarily to donors rather than its

citizens, significantly undermined the legitimacy of the Republic and played a major role in its eventual downfall. As she stated, financial resources alone are not sufficient to win public trust. Giustozzi similarly noted that the Republic was widely seen as lacking legitimacy, and not something people were willing to risk their lives for—except for those who benefited from it directly (Sopko, 2023; Murtazashvili, 2022; Giustozzi, cited in Sopko, 2023).

3.5 External missteps

Although internal institutional weaknesses set the stage for state fragility, they were significantly deepened by external forces that reshaped governance structures in Afghanistan. International donors, foreign governments, and external peace negotiations frequently bypassed Afghan institutions, creating parallel systems that undermined sovereignty and accountability. These external interventions did not simply coexist with domestic weaknesses; they amplified them by reinforcing elite dependence, eroding legitimacy, and weakening the state's ability to govern autonomously. Therefore, to fully grasp the trajectory of state failure, it is necessary to shift the focus from internal political dynamics to the external factors that intensified institutional fragility and accelerated the collapse of the Afghan Republic.

3.6 The exclusion of the Afghan government from U.S.-Taliban talks

The exclusion of the Afghan government from the 2020 U.S.-Taliban negotiations critically undermined the legitimacy and stability of the Afghan state. While the United States aimed to initiate intra-Afghan peace talks, the decision to negotiate directly with the Taliban, bypassing Kabul, signaled to many that the Afghan government lacked sovereignty. Former U.S. diplomat Hugo Llorens emphasized that engaging solely with the Taliban validated their narrative, portraying the Afghan government as merely a puppet (Sopko, 2023, p. 7). This perception was further reinforced when Taliban leader Haibatullah Akhundzada declared victory following the agreement, interpreting it as a military triumph rather than a step toward peace (Joscelyn & Roggio, 2020, para. 1). The immediate escalation of Taliban attacks post-agreement indicated a strategic choice to pursue power through force rather than negotiation. Analysts at the Center for Strategic and International Studies noted that the U.S. failed to secure enforceable security guarantees, leaving Afghan forces vulnerable and the central government weakened (Cordesman, 2020, p. 4). Additionally, the International Crisis Group highlighted that the Taliban's continued violence and reluctance to compromise delayed intra-Afghan talks, exacerbating instability (International Crisis Group, 2020). The psychological impact of the agreement demoralized Afghan security forces, with General Sami Sadat observing that soldiers shifted into "survival mode," eroding their commitment to defend the government (Sopko, 2023, p. 8). This series of events underscores how the exclusion of the Afghan government from critical negotiations contributed to the rapid falling apart of state structures and the eventual collapse of the Republic.

3.7 Creating a new institution

Overlooking traditional institutions such as the jirga and replacing them with externally imposed governance structures like the Community Development Councils (CDCs) under the National Solidarity

Programme (NSP) led to widespread concerns among Afghan villagers. These concerns stemmed from the perception that the government, with backing from foreign donors, was attempting to control rural areas through development schemes rather than empower them. Notably, for every dollar spent directly on community projects, an equal amount was reportedly consumed by administration, facilitation, and oversight, raising doubts about the program's effectiveness and intent. Many communities viewed this model as reminiscent of communist-era strategies that used development programs for political consolidation (Murtazashvili, 2020).

According to Murtazashvili, the local context revealed that the reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan, particularly the National Solidarity Programme (NSP), reflected a disconnect between the assumptions of the international community and the complex realities of Afghan society. These interventions not only failed to build upon existing local governance institutions but, in some cases, actively undermined them, thereby exacerbating conflict and instability. Murtazashvili concludes that reconstruction policies must be grounded in a deep and nuanced understanding of local governance systems and social dynamics to avoid repeating such missteps (Murtazashvili, 2020).

The experience in Afghanistan, particularly with legal titling and programs like the National Solidarity Programme (NSP), highlights the importance of understanding and working within community governance structures rather than replacing them with external alternatives. These lessons stress the need for a genuinely bottom-up approach that respects and builds upon the existing social fabric, often referred to by development scholars as 'working with the grain.' Such an approach is essential for future economic and developmental initiatives in Afghanistan and similar contexts. Recognizing and integrating established customary systems is key to achieving sustainable progress in areas where formal government structures are either weak or mistrusted (Levy, 2014).

The World Bank's evaluations of the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) highlighted the uneven and, in some cases, negative impacts of the program. While it had some positive short-term effects, the NSP ultimately undermined local governance structures and communities' ability to resolve disputes, thereby eroding social cohesion. Despite initial successes, such as the creation of Community Development Councils (CDCs), the long-term effects were less favorable (Beath, Fotini & Enikolopov, 2011).

Murtazashvili (2020) found that, despite decades of war, customary authorities in Afghanistan remained strong and resilient, reinventing themselves to meet local needs. In some areas, communities even began electing their traditional leaders through secret ballots, a practice that outpaced the formal, top-down appointments made by Kabul. Murtazashvili's study also revealed that, in contrast to the undermining efforts of international interventions like the NSP, these traditional governance structures were adapted in democratic ways, including the inclusion of women in leadership roles.

Murtazashvili concludes that the creation of new institutions in parallel to customary structures, without well-defined roles and sustained support, is unlikely to achieve the desired outcomes in community-driven development initiatives, especially in fragile and conflict-affected contexts like Afghanistan. Despite billions of dollars being spent on the National Solidarity Program (NSP), which ultimately undermined local governance, the program was still hailed as a success by international NGOs and politicians who funded it (Murtazashvili, 2020).

3.8 Building a parallel structure

Just as Karzai had allowed his governors to work around the formal rules of the game, international donors quickly began to build parallel structures to get around the lethargic and dysfunctional governance structures that they had helped to put in place. For example, the U.S. military created

Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) that operated as parallel provincial governorates from 2003 to 2013. PRTs worked closely with the NATO military operations in each district to channel development projects to the provinces. Provincial and district governors had no say in decisions about resource allocation, nor did citizens. NATO worked with a multitude of international NGOs and contractors to implement development projects, which were often in conflict with the military operations conducted in these regions, ostensibly on behalf of the government (Murtazashvili, 2020, p. 45).

This parallel governance led to the lack of a coordinated development agenda among the government of Afghanistan and international partners led to fragmented planning and implementation of projects, inadequate prioritization of investments, and much of the work being done by consultants or short-term contractors. The result has been low rates of development, diminished institutional capacity, and minimal private sector involvement in the different sectors. The failure of international organizations to implement policy reforms in Afghanistan highlights the challenges of fragmented governance, poor coordination, and unsustainable development practices. For example, despite over \$4 billion in international aid since 2002, Afghanistan's electrification efforts have not met expectations, particularly in rural areas, where 90% of the population remains without access to electricity. One of the primary reasons for this failure is the lack of a unified development agenda among the Afghan government and more than ten international development partners. This has led to disorganized planning, inadequate prioritization of investments, and inconsistent project execution. Additionally, policy and institutional barriers have further complicated progress, as five different government ministries had overlapping and sometimes contradictory responsibilities in the energy sector, creating inefficiencies and delays. A stark example of misaligned priorities and poor implementation is the Tarakhil Diesel Power Plant, a \$335 million U.S.-funded project, which was intended to support Kabul's electricity needs but ended up operating at only 1% of its total capacity due to a lack of fuel supply and proper planning. Moreover, instead of investing in long-term solutions such as renewable energy and sustainable infrastructure, international partners often relied on short-term projects managed by foreign consultants rather than building local capacity. As a result, Afghanistan's power sector remains highly dependent on imports, with 81% of its electricity coming from neighboring countries, and institutional capacity within the Afghan government remains weak. The case of Afghanistan's power sector reform demonstrates how ineffective coordination and misplaced priorities in international development efforts can lead to costly failures with limited long-term benefits (Amin & Bernell, 2018).

The main question is how the government and international organizations should manage international aid to be more effective and sustainable. Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart in *Fixing Failed States* explain the framework well. According to them, international aid must shift from short-term relief to long-term state-building by prioritizing local leadership, institutional capacity-building, and economic self-sufficiency. One of the biggest failures of aid is its donor-driven nature, where foreign governments and organizations implement projects without involving local authorities, leading to dependency and weak governance. For example, in Afghanistan, NATO's Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) operated parallel to the government, bypassing local leaders and creating fragmented governance (Murtazashvili, 2022). Similarly, in the energy sector, international donors implemented projects without coordination, resulting in misallocated resources like the \$335 million Tarakhil Power Plant, which operated at just 1% capacity due to poor planning (Amin & Bernell, 2018). To prevent such failures, aid should be channeled through national institutions rather than external contractors, and governments should establish clear development agendas to coordinate donor efforts (Ghani & Lockhart, 2008).

A strong example of a successful state-led approach is Singapore, which rejected aid dependency and instead developed a unified national strategy while strategically engaging with international organizations. Unlike many fragile states, Singapore's government, under Lee Kuan Yew, ensured that foreign aid and investment aligned with national priorities rather than donor-driven agendas. It established strong institutions, such as the Economic Development Board (EDB) and the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS), to direct economic planning, infrastructure investment, and financial stability. Furthermore, instead of relying on foreign consultants, Singapore invested in local expertise and human capital, ensuring that its population had the skills needed for long-term economic growth.

Additionally, strict anti-corruption measures, such as the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB), guaranteed transparency and prevented elite capture of resources, a common issue in aid-dependent states, which the author thinks Afghanistan lacks and needs the most. As a result, Singapore transitioned from a poor post-colonial nation to a global economic powerhouse, demonstrating that state-building, rather than foreign aid dependency, is the key to sustainable development. To replicate this success, fragile states like Afghanistan must prioritize institutional reforms, accountability measures, and long-term economic planning (Ghani & Lockhart, 2008).

4 Interaction between internal and external factors: reinforcing state fragility

A central shortcoming in the Afghan state-building project lies in how internal institutional pathologies and external interventions did not just coexist - they actively reinforced each other, creating a vicious cycle that deepened fragility. Rather than strengthening Afghan sovereignty, external aid and governance structures often bolstered the very internal weaknesses that undermined the regime.

First, external interventions reinforced centralization. Donors frequently bypassed local governance actors and channeled funds through Kabul-based institutions or international contractors, thereby strengthening Kabul's control at the expense of subnational autonomy. For example, the establishment of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), with resources and authority independent of Afghan provincial institutions, undermined the legitimacy and capacity of local government units (Ahmad 2020, 57 – reference not found in bibliography). Because these parallel structures funneled funding and decision-making through foreign-led initiatives, the central government's dominance grew, but not in a way that built local institutional resilience.

Second, the erosion of legitimacy was exacerbated by international processes. The Afghan government's exclusion from key negotiations, like the U.S.-Taliban peace talks, sent a signal to both domestic and international audiences that Kabul lacked real sovereignty. This undermining of legitimacy was not just symbolic: the Afghan state became increasingly perceived as a puppet of external powers. Moreover, donor dependency weakened the social contract between the state and its citizens. As the government relied heavily on foreign funds, it answered more to donors than its own population, further eroding its credibility. John F. Sopko's reports warned that corruption, coupled with massive inflows of aid and weak accountability, weakened the very legitimacy that reconstruction efforts were supposed to build (Sopko, 2023, p. 7).

Third, external parallelism undermined state capacity. Rather than strengthen Afghan institutions, many development projects were implemented via third-party NGOs, contractors, and international agencies, bypassing domestic bureaucracies. John F. Sopko's lessons-learned evaluations highlight that the creation of parallel institutions "drove confusion and undermined the state," and created "vast opportunities for rent-seeking" among non-state actors. Because key sectors (such as development, infrastructure, and security) were managed in this way, Afghan state ministries remained weak and under-resourced, lacking both administrative experience and financial control.

Conclusions

The collapse of the Afghan republic in 2021 was the result of both external shortcomings in international intervention and internal failures of governance. Internationally, the U.S.-led state-building effort

prioritized strengthening state capacity but did not bother establishing effective constraints on state power. Development projects, such as the National Solidarity Program (NSP), overlooked local governance structures and created parallel systems that undermined the Afghan government's legitimacy. In addition, she believes that the other mistake that the US made was that it created a parallel governance. This leads to different prioritization and a lack of a unified development agenda. To prevent such failures, aid should be channeled through national institutions rather than external contractors, and governments should establish clear development agendas to coordinate donor efforts, as Singapore did. Additionally, John F. Sopko's last report mentioned that excluding the republic government of Afghanistan weakened the government, whereas it strengthened the Taliban, which finally caused the collapse of the government.

The government structure, weak leadership, and legitimacy challenges further exacerbated the situation. A high level of centralized government proved to be a catalyst for a broader and more violent competition for power, which exacerbated long-running tensions between an urban elite eager to modernize and conservative rural populations distrustful of central governance. Furthermore, Ghani's politics paved the way for the collapse. He not only focused on surpassing warlords, which helped him against the Taliban, but also centralized the power so much that it became known as the Republic of Three. Last but not least, the republic lost legitimacy in the eyes of the people. Public institutions, instead of providing services to citizens, became engines of facilitating corruption and ensuring elite interests. The erosion of state legitimacy in the eyes of the Afghan public weakened the government's ability to enlist popular support against the insurgency. This corruption undermined the government and served as a huge recruiting opportunity for the Taliban.

Both internal and external factors played critical roles in the collapse of the Afghan republic. However, internal reasons, such as centralized governance, corruption, and lack of legitimacy, were the primary drivers of the state's failure. The external factors, while significant, exacerbated these internal weaknesses rather than addressing them. Therefore, future state-building efforts must focus on creating inclusive, accountable, and locally owned governance structures while ensuring that international support complements rather than undermines domestic institutions. By learning from these mistakes, the next government in Afghanistan, and similar contexts, can build a more resilient and legitimate state.

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