LOCAL GOVERNANCE UNDER TALIBAN RULE

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Acronyms:

CDC Community Development Council

DUC District Ulema Council

GDI General Directorate of Intelligence

IEA Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan

MRRD Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development

MoI Ministry of Interior

PUC Provincial Ulema Council

OAA Office of Administrative Affairs

NSP National Solidarity Program

Glossary:

CDCs: Community Development Councils, established by the World Bank-funded National Solidarity Program (NSP) and then taken over (until August 2021) by the Citizen's Charter Program.

IS-K: Islamic State in Khorasan

Kalay: A term used in the eastern region to refer to a collective of villages represented by a Malik and/or (formerly) by a CDC head.

Mullah/Imam: Prayer leader at a mosque.

Qari: A student or graduate of a madrasa who memorizes the Qur'an in full.

Qaria: A collective community unit represented by a mosque or grand mosque.

Qaryadar: Village administrator formally registered at the district's sub-directorate of village affairs. "Malik" and "Arbab" are also used interchangeably to refer to the same administrator.

Shaikh: Leader of a Muslim community.

Sharwal: Mayor.

Woleswal: District governor

Introduction

Local governance relations in Afghanistan have recently come to constitute the epicentre of interventions by an array of (sometimes) contradictory intervening actors and institutions. For instance, over the last two decades, the central government has used and exploited local government resources in pursuit of an over-centralized governing structure. At the same time, however, international military forces have worked to bolster local government institutions for two purposes: force protection and winning the hearts and minds of local populations (see Nemat, 2015). Some international development institutions (e.g., World Bank, UNDP) have focused their interventions on state-building efforts, democratization, and institutional development. Other countries in the region as well as religious networks, such Salafi and Shi'a groups, have targeted Afghan communities for spreading their own influence by building madrasas or mosques and mobilizing people around them. The Taliban, too, had its own way of maintaining a more substantial presence at the sub-national level through the use of shadow provincial and district governors alongside military courts focused on the fast delivery of "justice."[1] Hence, a clear understanding current local governance relations requires an in-depth picture of broader Afghan government relations and the interventions that preceded the Taliban's return to power in mid-2021. This report's aim is to unpack local and (especially) village-level government relations under Taliban rule by, for example, looking at the influence of different religious actors at the local level.

The main objective of this report is to achieve a greater understanding of current local governance dynamics in post-August 2021 Afghanistan under Taliban rule. More specifically, it aims to uncover how local government dynamics have changed in the eastern region since the Taliban took over in August 2021. The study works its way through a set of sub-questions to achieve this aim:

- What do the broader governance structures currently look like at the national level?
- What forms of community representation exist at the district/manteqa (area) level?

[1] Adam Baczko, *The Taliban Courts in Afghanistan: Waging War by Law* (Oxford University Press, 2023); Antonio Giustozzi, "The Taliban's 'Military Courts'," *Small Wars & Insurgencies 25*, no. 2 (2014): 284–96; Antonio Giustozzi and Adam Baczko, "The Politics of the Taliban's Shadow Judiciary, 2003–2013," *Central Asian Affairs* 1 (2014): 199–224.

- How does the Emirate (or communities) select counterparts ("elders" or representatives) in villages?
- Does the selection mechanism differ from community to community? How?
- Who within the Emirate establishes and maintains contact with local counterparts/elders?
- What are the differences between the local governance model of the republic period (pre-2021) and the monarchy period?

In this paper, "local governance" refers to the set of institutions, mechanisms, and processes by which people at the local level negotiate their interests and needs, mediate their differences, and exercise their rights and obligations at the local level.[2] It involves the distribution of resources shaped by underlying power relations and collective norms within a given territorial setting, be it a community, village, or collective of villages.[3] Local governance is heavily shaped by local elites connected to sociopolitical structures and processes beyond their local settings (De Waal, 2009; Nemat, 2015).[4] Hence, it involves actors beyond the confines of formal government institutions. Put another way, this paper uses the term "local governance" to focus on the existing mechanisms, processes, and structures used by the Taliban as Afghanistan's de facto ruling authority. It must be noted that the Taliban's approach to governing localities differs from that of Afghanistan's previous governments. However, there are elements of both approaches, with an additional layer of control and cohesion by the supreme leadership.

The report is structured into five main sections. Its introduction covers the report's objects of study, methodology, and limitations. Next, it presents an overview of the conceptual understating of some of its key concepts. In the following section, it highlights the local governance institutional hierarchy. Beyond that, it discusses the Taliban's actual boots on the ground at the local village level as well as its role in governance matters. Finally, the report assesses the role of religious scholars alongside various affiliate actors in local governance in the eastern region.

Methodology

This report employs qualitative methods in the form of key informant interviews (KIIs) and semi-structured interviews (SSIs) with interlocutors in Kandahar, Baghlan, Nangarhar, Laghman,

[2] Georg Lutz and Wolf Linder, *Traditional Structures in Local Governance for Local Development* (University of Berne, Switzerland Institute of Political Science, 2004), 16; Orzala Ashraf Nemat, "Local Governance in the Age of Liberal Interventionism: Governance Relations in the Post-2001 Afghanistan" (PhD diss., SOAS, University of London, 2015).
[3] Some use the term "local governance" to refer to a broad spectrum consisting of overall sub-national governance relations or any form of governance beyond the center.
[4] Alex De Waal, "Mission Without End? Peacekeeping in the African Political Marketplace," *International Affairs* 85, no. 1 (2009): 99–113.

Nuristan, and Wardak Provinces. Additionally, both of the authors make use of observation notes and interviews from their previous works on the subject. Overall, the report is based on SSIs with 43 individuals, carried out in March 2022 and September–December 2023; it is supplemented by earlier primary data collected by the authors.

The main aim of these interviews is to investigate diversity across the eastern and central regions despite the relatively small sample featuring various levels of government (e.g., central, sub-national). All of the interviewees' details are coded and anonymized to ensure their protection. While the district names are mentioned, the village names are concealed to ensure the safety of the interviewees.

The scope of this study is clearly limited; thus, it may not be fully representative of the context in the considered region. However, the authors believe that it still offers a valuable glimpse of the changes in local governance dynamics in eastern Afghanistan as well as parts of the Kabul region with a particular focus on the Taliban's relationship with the Salafi minority.

Historical Context and Local Governance over the Last 20 Years

Under the monarchy (1880–1973) and the first republic (1973–1978), villages were largely left to their own devices, with local elites expected to handle taxation, conscription, and relations with the central government. In contrast, over the last 20 years, Afghan villages have come to constitute the epicentre of interventions by an array of (sometimes) contradictory intervening actors and institutions (Nemat, 2015). For instance, international military forces, the UN, the World Bank, and even regional and religious networks (e.g., among Hanafi, Jafari, and Salafi groups) have all focused on building solid foundations in Afghan villages, investing heavily in infrastructural, sociopolitical, and cultural interventions. These interventions have sometimes taken the shape of formal development projects in the villages and other times taken that of informal interventions. Some interventions have aimed to promote good governance and democratization, while others sought to win the hearts and minds of local populations. Notably, religious organizations and networks generally targeted villages to build up madrasas and mosques and, in turn, to influence people's religious beliefs and mindsets (Nemat, 2015). These interventions have significantly shaped local power dynamics in ways that are crucial to our understanding of local governance relations beyond the formal systems of governance in Afghanistan. The institutions, actors, and decision-making

processes in localities have been influenced by the patronage relationships established between local actors and non-local intervening forces.

Global powers have always sought (to varying degrees of success) to reform governance institutions in Afghanistan, and Afghan elites at both the national and local levels have long sought to exploit the country's strategic location to extract resources and support for their agendas (Rubin 1992; Saikal 2004; Rubin 2006; Barfield 2010). Therefore, local governance relations during the 20 years of direct military intervention by international forces have been shaped by a broad interplay and bargaining process among local elites, global and regional superpowers, and local and national government elites (Nemat, 2015: 55).

The third republic (2004–2021) failed to institute proper local governance mechanisms for many reasons, including a lack of access to much of the country due to violent conflict, center-periphery rivalries, and infighting over "ownership" of village governance between government agencies, such as the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG), the MRRD, and (later) other actors like the National Security Council, all of which sought to maximize their control over villages for different reasons. A significant element in local governance relations during the final few years of the third republic was the loss of government access to localities (districts and villages), which resulted in large areas being entirely cut off from state governance and essential service delivery. In summary, as Francis Brown (2021) outlines in her briefing paper, there are three key shortcomings from which some lessons may be learned:

- framing "the lack of government-citizen communication and linkages as technical shortcomings of Afghan capacity and knowledge", rather than "deeper political obstacles",
- building the capacity of district and provincial councils even though these bodies lacked defined authorities, and
- a focus on "enhancing skills that would make Afghans ideal recipients of donor aid rather than on strengthening capabilities more relevant to local Afghan political life".[5]

Legal and Policy Changes and Continuity

In terms of village-level legal and administrative procedures, most interviewees reported that there have not been any changes from the pre-August 2021 era. The roles and responsibilities of the village affairs sub-directorate remain the same. On paper, the procedure to select a village representative (or "Malik") is the same as it was before. This means that a village representative is

[5] Frances Z. Brown, *Aiding Afghan Local Governance: What Went Wrong?* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2021).

nominated through a petition submitted by the candidate to the sub-directorate of village affairs, who then submits the petition to the local district court. (Notably, the district courts are active and operational everywhere this study's interviews were conducted.) Then, the district court reviews and verifies the signatures of locals who support the petition (Waseeqa) before approving the person as a Malik (Qaryadar) and providing him with a formal stamp of approval to deal with village-level administrative matters. During the later years of the third republic, the Ashraf Ghani government proposed the Local Councils Law (or *Qanoon e Shura Hay Mahali*)[6] to formalize the structures and processes of provincial, district, and village councils. Among other things, this law formalized the Community Development Councils (CDCs) as the formal village councils and each one's head as the village representative. Notably, however, it is difficult to say whether this law worked well (or whether it was even truly implemented) because, following intensification of the ongoing conflict, the government lost control over many areas.[7] What is evident is that this law has not been adopted by the Taliban since it took power in August 2021. Instead, they have followed the older Malik registration system, which was still being enforced under President Karzai.

One major (informal) policy change confirmed by most of the interviewees, is that neither former officials from the previous regime nor anyone not endorsed by the district-level government can currently be approved as Malik. For example, one popular elder in a village in Laghman had his candidacy application rejected because Taliban officials at the district level did not like him.[8] Instead, the Taliban selected another individual who had been proposed by local people. Importantly, the Taliban did not impose an outsider as village representative. Their policy seems to be to appoint local individuals who are either supportive of the Taliban or at least deemed to not be actively hostile to it.

Village Governance Councils and Public Spaces

Regarding village-level governance structures, while Maliks operate primarily as village administrators, the village elders' shura (council) works mostly in an ad hoc, non-systematic manner, in stark contrast to what the CDCs used to do. The CDCs have not been functional since the return of the Taliban to power; the only institutions to remain are those at the local level comprising people who convene from time to time on an ad hoc basis to discuss village development-related matters. There is no longer any formal program to support CDCs beyond isolated instances of NGOs channelling very limited development aid to communities. This humanitarian aid, however, is

[6] https://law.acku.edu.af/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/acku_risalah_js7442_2_qaaf29_1398_n1342_dari_title1.pdf
[7] https://www.etilaatroz.com/61557/%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%88%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%DB%8C%E2%80%8C%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%9B-%D8%B4%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B7-%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%B2%D8%AF%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A7/
[8] Interview with [name withheld], village elder in Alingar district, Laghman Province, September 2023.

generally channelled through village representatives and district authorities.[9] For instance, in the past, this role was filled by CDCs with a head, a deputy, a treasurer, and a secretary who would take note of all points discussed and communicate them with others. It must be noted that this whole process was partially systematic, as it was facilitated and supported by NGOs through the National Solidarity Program (NSP). Following the closure of the Citizens Charter Program (the new format of the World Bank-funded community-driven development program known as the NSP) after August 2021 the CDCs have gradually lost their authority as the main village governance structures despite the lack of firm Taliban objections to them.[10] Although most of the interviewees mentioned that CDC leaders are still around and work on an ad hoc basis on a few development projects to be implemented in their areas, their role in humanitarian distribution is either minimal or non-existent.[11]

In Wardak, for example, an interviewee indicated that "no one asks the former CDCs, and no one talks to the CDC members anymore."[12] Hence, local shuras (intended as gatherings of village representatives) continue to meet to discuss village-related matters and issues (e.g., disputes, fights among villagers),[13] but they do so in an informal capacity. One elder explained how village representation and governance have changed:

We are now back to the pre-war, King Zahir Shah systems of Malik representation for a village or cluster of villages. […] The other day I heard that the Ministry of Interior sent a letter that for each ten large or twenty small villages, they should select one Malik. This Malik or representative will be the point of contact between villages and the government. For every issue in the village—when someone escapes, or other conflicts emerge—people contact this representative, and he keeps us informed.[14]

What is now gone are support tools, such as NSP facilitators training village CDC members to analyse poverty and other local dynamics, to identify village needs and the most vulnerable members, and to develop plans and manage budgeting interventions. Since August 2021, under Taliban rule and current humanitarian intervention dynamics, attention and resources for social mobilization (through which communities are enabled to identify, prioritize, and advance their own needs) have entirely or mostly ended; NGOs now mainly make use of surveys and lists of

[9] The Community Development Councils (CDCs), which were established as part of the World Bank's Community-Driven Development (CDD) scheme, represented a vital pillar of local governance and development under the republic (2003–2021). Through the CDD approach, these councils empowered communities by providing them with the autonomy to identify their own development priorities and manage the resources allocated for projects. However, government institutions differed in how they perceived the role of the CDCs, especially regarding whether it should be limited to service delivery alone or should take on the core responsibilities of local governance (village governance)(Nemat, 2015).
[10] Interview with [name withheld], village elder in Alingar district, Laghman Province, September 2023.
[11] Interview with [name withheld], village elder in Koz Kunar district, Nangarhar province, October 2023; Interview with [name withheld], village health worker in Alingar district, Laghman Province, September 2023.
[12] Interview with [name withheld], village elder in Jaghatu district, Wardak Province, October 2023.
[13] Interview with [name withheld], village elder in Jaghatu district, Wardak Province, October 2023.
[14] Interview with [names withheld], village representatives in Jaghatu district, Wardak Province, October 2023.

beneficiaries for humanitarian aid, which are in most cases prepared by village elders and district authorities.[15]

Therefore, what is left in terms of shared public spaces in villages are grand mosques (for Friday and Eid prayers), local mosques (for daily prayers), primary and secondary schools, and, in some villages, high schools, clinics (both private and public), libraries (mostly in the immediate vicinity of schools), and madrasas (religious seminaries).[16] The presence of these spaces varies by region. For example, relative to the eastern region (Laghman and Nangarhar), Jaghatu district in Wardak seems to have few public spaces. The spread of local madrasas in the eastern region increased after 2001, as a madrasa was built in almost every village by followers of a Sunni Muslim network. The pace of madrasa development accelerated even further following the Taliban's return to power, at least in most of the eastern and southeastern regions and parts of the central regions.[17]

The emergence of the Ulema Councils at the district and provincial levels is another important aspect of the recent evolution of local governance under Taliban rule. The Amir (supreme leader) of the Taliban began the process of establishing provincial Ulema Councils for all 34 provinces in 2022. Some members of these councils are local ulema who have undergone some kind of orientation training in Kandahar to familiarize them with the supreme leadership's expectations, while others are locally influential ulema.[18] Notably, however, semi-formal district-level councils of ulema had already appeared prior to August 2021 to resolve local conflicts and disputes and deliver justice through Taliban military courts. Such district-level councils remain active in some areas, but the formal provincial Ulema Councils are more proactive, pervasive, and effective and have far greater authority. In fact, they wield considerable power and authority over even district-level and provincial governors, mayors, and police chiefs.[19]

[15] Several interviews in Laghman, Nangarhar, and Wardak confirmed this point.
[16] Interviews in most areas confirmed these as public spaces at the village level.
[17] Mawlawi Keramatullah Akhondzada, the Islamic Education Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Education, indicated in his annual accountability report that 100,000 new positions have been opened to promote Islamic education through madrasas. See the following link: https://youtu.be/1fVYSLY8U8Y?si=Tu5Iu6aeooDcFQqw.
[18] Interview with AW**, local researcher in Kandahar, December 2023.
[19] A. Giustozzi, "Taliban and the Future of the State in Afghanistan," LSE, December 26, 2022, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2022/12/26/taliban-and-the-future-of-the-state-in-afghanistan/; Interview with AW**, local researcher in Kandahar, December 2023. See also the following link: https://youtu.be/1fVYSLY8U8Y?si=Tu5Iu6aeooDcFQqw.

Local Governance Structures in the Post-August 2021 Context

The Supreme Leadership (Kandahar)

The Taliban's governance system has yet to be comprehensively defined, and there are many competing understandings among the Taliban's leaders of what the system should be. The role of the Amir is accepted by all Taliban members to be supreme in matters of "Islamic and Sharia Law," but the Amir also claims the right to supervise the executive (i.e., the Kabul-based cabinet). This has been disputed by multiple cabinet members, including through some videos circulated in early 2023. Regardless, the Amir has successfully appointed his loyalist, Abdul Hakim Haqqani, as chief justice and head of the Supreme Court (a power formerly held by the president of the Islamic Republic), meaning that the Amir effectively holds full control over the judiciary. In terms of local governance, the Amir was able in 2022 to claim control over appointments to all senior positions at the provincial level. The General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI) also reports directly to the supreme leader.[20]

The General Directorate of Intelligence

The GDI has emerged as a critical tool of local governance.[21] Its presence is felt not only in the capital and at the provincial level but also at the district and village levels.[22] It has strong information-gathering networks—a combination of the former regime's professionals and Taliban

[20] ToloNews, "Islamic Emirate Brings New Appointments," January 5, 2024, https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-186823.
[21]BBC Pashto, "Afghan Taliban Announced Temporary Government, Mullah Mohmmad Hassan Will Be Head of It," 2021, https://www.bbc.com/pashto/58479665; ToloNews, "Islamic Emirate Leader Meets with Provincial Intelligence Heads," 2022, https://tolonews.com/index.php/afghanistan-180256; Waliullah Rehmani and Steven Butler, "Afghanistan's Intelligence Agency Emerges as New Threat to Independent Media," *Committee to Protect Journalists*, March 2, 2022, https://cpj.org/2022/03/afghanistans-intelligence-agency-emerges-as-new-threat-to-independent-media/.
[22]Interview with [name withheld], religious scholar in Dawlatshah district, Laghman Province, September 2023; Interview with [name withheld], village elder 2 in Koz Kunar district, Nangarhar Province, October 2023. [23] Interview with [name withheld], religious scholar in Dawlatshah district, Laghman Province, September 2023; Interview with [name withheld], village elder in Koz Kunar district, Nangarhar Province, October 2023.

insurgency networks—and it reportedly has a strong capacity to track any target, from military to political and civilian opponents.[23]

The "Center" (Kabul)

The center's role is one of administrative and bureaucratic management in the Taliban's system of governance. The Taliban has largely retained the pre-existing infrastructure and government structures with the exception of a few ministries and independent bodies that were dismantled following the regime change. The significance of the center's authority over local governance affairs lies in its resource-allocation powers at the sub-national level. Line ministries' provincial and district-level staff are appointed by the executive administration in Kabul. Additionally, the relationship between Kabul and the UN (as well as other aid agencies) is essential to the continued strengthening of Kabul's authority over the provinces. The Kandahar-based Taliban leadership, to maintain authority over the "center" or the administration in Kabul, have used the GDI to keep close eyes on the actions and practices of different ministries as well as UN and other aid agencies. NGOs and others report frequent encounters with the GDI at the provincial level.[24]

Provinces and Districts

The relationship between provinces and the center is not covered by this study. Suffice it to say that following the dissolution of the IDLG, sub-national governance affairs matters reverted to the earlier model, leaving the Ministry of Interior (MoI; currently under the leadership of Serajuddin Haqqani) in charge of the police and the Office of the Administration Affairs (OAA; based in the presidential palace) in charge of provincial and district-level governors. There is a need for further investigation on how these matters are handled from the OAA's side. Now, as in the past, these relations between national and sub-national levels are based on patronage and personal connections.[25]

Afghanistan has 34 provinces, and the number of districts was 400 just before the Taliban returned to power. There have reportedly been some developments with regard to the establishment of new districts in some areas, but formal documentation is difficult to find. Provincial governors are

[23] Interview with [name withheld], religious scholar in Dawlatshah district, Laghman Province, September 2023; Interview with [name withheld], village elder in Koz Kunar district, Nangarhar Province, October 2023.
[24] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (January 2024), 75, https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2024-01-30qr.pdf.
[25] Under the post-2001 republic, gubernatorial and sub-national positions were distributed through powerful leaders of different politico-military parties who were part of the Bonn agreement. See Nemat (2015) for further elaboration on this.

appointed via orders from the Taliban supreme leader and are announced publicly through his spokesman, while district-level governors and police chiefs are appointed through the MoI.

In terms of changes to district-level administration, five new sub-directorates have been established at the district level:

1. The Ushr directorate
2. The Zakat directorate
3. The Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice directorate (PVPV)
4. The State Justice directorate (Qazai Dawlat)
5. The Martyrs and Disabled directorate.[26]

Municipal Governance (Sharwali)

Municipal governance is also an important part of local governance relations, as it mainly concerns tax collection and the provision of important urban services in cities and townships. Municipal governance covers the Kabul municipality (as a separate independent body), four central municipalities for key provincial municipalities (Jalalabad, Herat, Kandahar, and Mazar-e-Sharif), and over 150 district municipalities that are considered mixed rural/urban or either urban or rural. In terms of appointments, the Taliban has thus far followed a similar procedure to the one used in the past, meaning that Kabul and the four provincial municipality mayors are selected by their supreme leadership, while the rest of the mayors are appointed by the OAA (where municipality affairs are currently managed from).[27] It must be noted that, under the republic, the municipalities had their own deputy ministerial entity under the IDLG. Since the Taliban's return to power, this office has been placed under the Office of Administrative Affairs.[28]

[26] Interview with ** provincial district officer, Laghman province, September 2023.
[27] Kabul Now, "Akhundzada Appoints New Provincial Governors and Security Heads," August 29, 2023, https://kabulnow.com/2023/08/akhundzada-appoints-new-provincial-governors-and-security-heads; ToloNews, "Islamic Emirate Brings New Appointments," January 5, 2024, https://tolonews.com/afghanistan-186823; Interview with H**, former government official from Municipalities Deputy Directorate (IDLG) in Kabul, December 2023.
[28] Interview with H**, former government official from Municipalities Deputy Directorate (IDLG) in Kabul, December 2023.

The Provincial Ulema Councils

By the second year of Taliban rule, the Amir began mandating the establishment of provincial Ulema Councils (PUCs). As discussed in detail in the section below, there are similarities between PUCs and the informal district-level councils of ulema, the local shuras (councils) established by the Constitution of the Islamic Republic. One source described their composition as follows:

[…] they are prominent religious leaders and are respected in their religious circles at the local level, if not in their communities. Each district is represented by two members, at least in Nangarhar, in the Provincial Ulama Council.

This same source described their role as follows:

The PUC has made itself accessible to different groups and receives complaints from the general public and NGOs and CSOs. The head of the NGOs department once, in a meeting in ACBAR, had asked NGOs to approach the PUCs in their respective provinces to handle their aid-related problems instead of bringing them to Kabul, as they are more powerful and could be probably [more] easily convinced than the line ministries in Kabul.[29]

This attempt could be seen as a move to strengthen "party" (that is, the Amir's) control over provincial governance structures. The results of this study show that, in nearly all PUCs, the leadership lies with a Hanafi mullah who has been either a member of the Taliban or a close ally. However, reviewing profiles of some Ulema Council members reveals that they are a mix of influential provincial ulema who come together frequently to discuss local communities' issues and needs and to monitor and review the actions of local officials. At times, PUC members have been highly critical of the Taliban regime. For example, a voice clip of the Nangarhar PUC head once went viral due to the harsh criticism that he levied against provincial authorities with a particular focus on corruption, nepotism, and chaos.[30]

It must be noted that there is no clarity when it comes to the structural or administrative relationship between each district-level shura and the PUC.

[29] Interview with [name withheld], NGO worker in Jalalabad city, Nangarhar Province, October 2023.
[30] This audio clip was shared through various WhatsApp groups and social media pages in November 2022; see the following link to the clip itself: https://twitter.com/RahmatAndar1/status/1597600358192549889.

The Courts

The Taliban's Shari'a courts have taken the place of the Islamic Republic's government courts. In contrast to the time of the insurgency, however, there are no more mobile Taliban courts taking justice to the villages. Taliban police (and perhaps also "commanders") are reportedly dispensing justice directly, at least in some areas. According to some informants, local Taliban commanders intervene in most cases, especially unresolved disputes, to try to resolve them with the help of elders.[31]

The Taliban's de facto government allows community elders to settle disputes without state authorities interfering, except in cases in which Taliban members are involved.[32] If either party in a dispute rejects the mediation of the elder—or if the elder fails to find a solution—the case is sent to the court. Notably, however, all criminal cases are dealt with by authorities. Taliban police or district officials normally try to resolve cases without involving the courts, but if they fail to do so, the cases are sent to the provincial court. 33

The Villages

According to MRRD (Ministry of Rural Reconstruction and Development) records, there are approximately 35,000 villages in Afghanistan. The Islamic Republic never managed to provide a clear definition of what constitutes a village administration. Previously, regimes had simply adopted whatever definition suited them (Nemat, 2015). The Taliban is reintroducing the pre-1992 *alaqadri* (sub-district region) system and encouraging village clusters to register one *malik* (or arbab) per cluster (Nemat, 2015: 146).

Relations with villages at the district and provincial levels are regulated through the *qariadar* (a kind of village administrator often also referred to as a malik), even if the malik is not necessarily serving in an official capacity. In the past, CDC heads (in cases where the head was a different person than the qariadar) played a similar role. There are also cases in which the primary mosque imam, the qariadar, and the CDC head may be the same person (Nemat, 2015). As explained earlier, the CDCs are gradually waning due to a lack of development aid, though CDC heads appear to be still exercising some influence in certain areas.[34] The qariadars are acknowledged by authorities as their official counterparts in the village. In fact, the qariadar's stamp is registered with the authorities and

[31] Interview with S**, elder in Achin district, September 2023; Interview with *M*, elder, Salafi, in Watapur district, Kunar Province, September 2023.
[32] Interview with **R, elder in Behsud district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023.
[33] Interview with S**, elder in Achin district, September 2023.
[34] Interview with [name withheld], village health worker in Alingar district, Laghman Province, September 2023.

is required whenever one of their villagers needs an ID or another official document or wants to file a petition or complaint. The qariadars were described by one elder as the "kings" of the villages.[35]

Notably, each of these representatives (malik, qariadar, mullah, and ulema) has working relations with district officials and sometimes even provincial officials. For instance, in districts with an informal council of ulema, members often gather village elders and convene meetings with district-level and provincial officials.[36]

The Emirate's Actual Presence in the Villages

The Taliban's presence in rural areas primarily consists of district-level police stations, which are typically staffed by 20–30 non-uniformed policemen as well as checkpoints of four to five men covering a cluster of villages.[37] The police patrol the countryside, but patrol frequency depends on several factors. One such factor is threat perception; the more the Taliban sees or suspects activities of opposition groups, the more frequently it conducts patrols. Another is the location relative to police outposts. In villages near the provincial center, Taliban patrols are far more frequent.[38] Many villages only get visited every month or two, while others are visited weekly—but villages located next to a Taliban post or police station may get visited almost every day. The police regularly meet with village shuras or at least speak with villagers and elders. However, it should be noted that, by and large, the Taliban relies on village informers to keep abreast of their situations.[39] The GDI is also known to maintain checkpoints on the roads, though few details are available on this dynamic.

Of course, there are villages of which some residents are Taliban members. Such villages effectively have a permanent Taliban presence, with local members being likely to intervene in dispute-

[35] Interview with **M, elder, Salafi, in Asmaar district, Kunar Province, October 2023.
[36] Interview with [name withheld], village elder in Alingar district, Laghman Province, September 2023; Interview with [name withheld], village elder in Koz Kunar district, Nangarhar Province, October 2023.
[37] Interview with *M*, elder, Salafi, in Watapur district, Kunar Province, September 2023; Interview with **R, elder in Behsud district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023.
[38] Interview with **B, elder in Behsud district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023.
[39] Interview with A**, elder, Salafi, in Sorkhrod district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023; Interview with *S*, elder in Naziyaan district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023; Interview with H**, elder in Amla village, Khewa district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023; Interview with **M, elder, Salafi, in Asmaar district, Kunar Province, October 2023; Interview with **K, elder in Khogyani district, Nangarhar Province, October 2023; Interview with *N*, elder in Alingar district, Laghman Province, October 2023; Interview with *G*, elder, Salafi, in Alingar district, Laghman Province, October 2023.

resolution efforts.[40] Some such members are Taliban commanders who have held onto their armed retinue from the insurgency era, seemingly having yet to integrate into the Taliban's security forces.[41]

Overall, the presence of security and intelligence forces in villages is much stronger than it had been under the previous regime, despite police stations being staffed at far lower levels.[42] In general, even villagers who are notably less-than-friendly toward the Taliban acknowledge that security constitutes less of a concern under the new regime.[43]

Compared to the security forces, civilian district-level officials appear much less frequently in the villages, if at all. They may visit a village once every one or two months at their most frequent. Elders endorsed by the Taliban may visit the district police chief or district governor every week or two, mostly to raise their own issues. Occasionally, the village shura may also visit Taliban officials, or authorities will invite or summon elders to visit in order to discuss local problems and development efforts. In any case, Taliban officials are much more likely to turn up in villages than their Islamic Republic predecessors, surely in part due to the enhanced security.[44]

The Emirate and the Village Elders: A New Dawn?

In the first few months following the regime change in August 2021, the Taliban's new provincial authorities announced a new policy of embracing community elders as partners in running districts and villages. From Baghlan to eastern Afghanistan, elders reported being told between October and December 2021 that they "are the key player of the district and should be respected by Taliban commanders and officials."[45]

[40] Interview with *M*, elder, Salafi, in Watapur district, Kunar Province, September 2023; Interview with H**, elder in Amla village, Khewa district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023.
[41] Interview with [name withheld], Salafi scholar and sheikh in Dangam district, Kunar Province, September 2023.
[42] Interview with [name withheld], village elder in Koz Kunar district, Nangarhar Province, October 2023; Interview with [name withheld], religious scholar in Dawlatshah district, Laghman Province, September 2023.
[43] Interview with [name withheld], Salafi scholar and sheikh in Dangam district, Kunar Province, September 2023; Interview with **W, elder in Dur Baba district, Nangarhar Province, October 2023.
[44] Interview with [name withheld], Salafi scholar and sheikh in Dangam district, Kunar Province, September 2023; Interview with *M*, elder, Salafi, in Watapur district, Kunar Province, September 2023; Interview with S**, elder in Achin district, September 2023; Interview with **R, elder in Behsud district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023; Interview with A**, elder, Salafi, in Marwara district, Kunar Province, September 2023; Interview with S**, elder in Achin district, September 2023; Interview with **R, elder in Behsud district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023; Interview with **W, elder in Dur Baba district, Nangarhar Province, October 2023; Interview with **K, elder in Khogyani district, Nangarhar Province, October 2023; Interview with *N*, elder in Alingar district, Laghman Province, October 2023; Interview with *M*, elder, Pashai, in Kamdish district, Nuristan Province, October 2023.
[45] Interview with ***A, elder in Dahn-i-Ghori district, Baghlan Province, March 2022.

In a meeting that we had with Baghlan's governor, we were told that elders are the owners of the districts, the representatives of the villagers, and also decision-makers for the districts, and he also told us that we have the authority to decide about good Taliban and bad Taliban in our district.[46]

In Kunar, the new Taliban-appointed governors had the same message: "the elders are the eyes of the government and provincial government and local district government cannot enforce a proper governance without the support of the elders"; "the elders of the district should help the local Taliban officials in bringing reform […] and making a powerful government."[47] The Kunar provincial governor said the following to elders in November 2021:

The elders are the observers of [the Emirate's] activities in the districts, and they have the right to complain about the local Taliban officials if they create problems for the villagers, ask for bribes, or misuse their position and annoy the villagers.[48]

In exchange, the Taliban expected elders to help in identifying local Islamic State in Khorasan (IS-K) members. Likewise, the provincial authorities in Nangarhar announced in December 2021 that a new relationship would be established "between the local people in the districts and Taliban local district officials," as:

the local elders of a district are the real players of the district, and they know the problems of the districts, they know how to manage the district, and they should give advice to the local Taliban district officials for better management in the district.[49]

The approach adopted by the new power-holders seemed quite humble and enlightened, as one elder recounted:

In a meeting with the governor of the Taliban in Nangarhar, he told us that Taliban local officials in the district are new; they might not have much experience in running a district, [and] there might be some unprofessional officials and commanders in the district. That's why the governor of the Taliban and other provincial officials told us that the elders should observe the activities of the local Taliban officials in the districts and, if there [is] some misuse of positions and violations by any local Taliban officials, […] should inform the district and provincial officials […][50]

[46] Interview with ***A, elder in Dahn-i-Ghori district, Baghlan Province, March 2022.
[47] Interview with **W, elder in Nari district, Kunar Province, March 2022.
[48] Interview with **W, elder in Nari district, Kunar Province, March 2022.
[49] Interview with **G, elder in Shinwar district, Nangarhar Province, March 2022.
[50] Interview with **G, elder in Shinwar district, Nangarhar Province, March 2022.

The elders seem to have been positively impressed by such statements. One of the most optimistic interviewees made the following comment:

After 20 years, elders regained their deserved position, from a symbolic position to [that of] a decision-maker […] During the past 20 years, in the period of Karzai and Ghani, the rules and duties of the elders were unclear, and elders played a merely symbolic role. Now, with the coming of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the roles and duties of the elders are returned to them; who knows more about the villagers and about their districts?[51]

However, things turned out to be quite a bit more complicated.

How the Taliban Selected Their Counterparts among the Elders

The Taliban's embrace of the elders turned out to be more limited than initially claimed. Early meetings between the new Taliban authorities and elders were typically organized by pro-Taliban elders, who would also (at least in some cases) do the talking, but "neutral" elders were also invited.[52] In other cases, however, early meetings only involved elders with a long track record of good relations with Taliban insurgents. Only a few officials, such as the district governor of Berg Matal, were reported to be meeting elders not linked to the Taliban.[53] The Taliban soon (if not from the start) restricted the range of elders with whom they consulted on policy issues to those deemed close to the Taliban. In insurgency-affected environments (e.g., Kunar), interactions between the remaining elders and authorities ended up being driven by the need of the latter for support from the former in monitoring local IS-K activities.[54]

Each village has one or two elders selected by the Taliban as their representatives.[55] Village qariadar roles were typically filled by the Taliban's best local contacts, though some republic-era qariadars stayed on following the regime change.[56]

[51] Interview with ***A, elder in Dahn-i-Ghori district, Baghlan Province, March 2022.
[52] Interview with **G, elder in Shinwar district, Nangarhar Province, March 2022.
[53] Interview with **Q, elder in Barg Matal district, March 2022.
[54] Interview with **W, elder in Nari district, Kunar Province, March 2022.
[55] Interview with S**, elder in Achin district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023.
[56] Interview with H**, elder in Amla village, Khewa district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023; Interview with *G*, elder, Salafi, in Alingar district, Laghman Province, October 2023; Interview with *A*, elder in Wama district, Nuristan Province, October 2023; Interview with [name withheld], village health worker in Alingar district, Laghman Province, September 2023.

Another important change in village representation, according to some interviewees, was the end of nepotism among former strongmen and warlords, who would automatically take over key local positions following the departure of their relatives. For example, one village qariadar (or malik) in Nangarhar was the brother of a local strongman who later became an MP.[57] The Taliban reportedly insisted on not having one of their lot take over, instead appointing someone who had not served the previous regime and who was acceptable among the local people as a representative. This approach, however, has not always worked, as some qariadars simply stepped into a job that nobody wanted. For instance, a village elder in Jaghatu (Wardak Province) noted that:

Village representation requires a lot of work, and dealing with the Taliban and district authorities and their intelligence, etc. No one in our village is really interested in having that troubled job. So, there is this man who was almost no one in the past—he found some links with the Taliban, and he proceeded to register himself as the Malik. So, now, he is our Malik. The elders in the village discuss local issues, find solutions—but this man is the main line of communication with authorities at the district level.[58]

Elders who were close to the previous government have either fled or kept a low profile, aside from those who quickly developed close relations with the Taliban as well. Depending on the influence of the previous regime in each area, the elders who left range from a majority to a small minority. In some areas, like Nazyaan, most of the elders who served under the previous regime are still in place, as collaboration with the Taliban was already extensive there before August 2021.[59] Many elders active under the previous government are still active participants in village elder councils but rarely actively participate in meetings with Taliban officials. They generally do not act as intermediaries with the Emirate.[60] One exception is represented by the wealthiest elders and those representing powerful tribes, who were more successful in establishing strong connections with the Taliban regime.[61]

[57] Interview with * NGO worker in Jalalabad city, Nangarhar Province, October 2023.
[58] Interview with ** village 1elder in Jaghatu district, Wardak Province, October 2023.
[59] Interview with *S*, elder in Naziyaan district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023; Interview with *N*, elder in Alingar district, Laghman Province, October 2023.
[60] Interview with *M*, elder, Salafi, in Watapur district, Kunar Province, September 2023; Interview with S**, elder in Achin district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023; Interview with **R, elder in Behsud district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023; Interview with A**, elder, Salafi, in Marwara district, Kunar Province, September 2023; Interview with H**, elder in Amla village, Khewa district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023; Interview with **B, elder in Behsud district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023; Interview with *G*, elder, Salafi, in Alingar district, Laghman Province, October 2023; Interview with *M*, elder, Pashai, in Kamdish district, Nuristan Province, October 2023; Interview with *A*, elder in Wama district, Nuristan Province, October 2023; Interview with **R, elder in Behsud district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023.
[61] Interview with **K, elder in Sarkano district, Kunar Province, September 2023.

How the Taliban and Elders Interacted

In eastern Afghanistan, by March 2022, elders were lodging many "complaints and suggestions on bringing stability and security in our district" as well as "complaints about some Taliban members who are disturbing the villagers, taking money from the villagers and many other complaints"; they were also providing "advice on how the Taliban local authorities can improve governance in our district."[62] The Taliban turned out to be particularly concerned with the security of the villages and expected the full cooperation of the elders in keeping them aware of major disputes (among villages or tribes) and other local issues. Another task attributed by the Taliban to the elders was to collect zakat, invite the youth to attend madrasas, and guarantee that villagers respect Shari'a.[63]

In subsequent months, elders continued raising complaints about the behavior or abuses of power of Taliban members with district authorities. The Taliban insists that anybody can raise such complaints and concerns at the district and provincial levels.[64] However, elders with long-standing links to the Taliban appear to be far more effective at getting authorities to respond to such complaints.[65]

How the Elders View Taliban Governance

Some of the elders remain positive about the Taliban's "embrace" policy. Pro-Taliban elders are adamant that the Taliban consults with them and their colleagues.[66] A more common view, however, is that the Taliban tends to inform elders more than it consults with them.[67] [68] Even some elders sympathetic to the Taliban agree with this point.[69]

[62] Interview with **Q, elder in Barg Matal district, March 2022.
[63] Interview with *M*, elder, Salafi, in Watapur district, Kunar Province, September 2023; Interview with S**, elder in Achin district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023; Interview with A**, elder, Salafi, in Marwara district, Kunar Province, September 2023; Interview with **M, elder, Salafi, in Asmaar district, Kunar Province, October 2023
[64] Interview with H**, elder in Amla village, Khewa district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023.
[65] Interview with *M*, elder, Salafi, in Watapur district, Kunar Province, September 2023; Interview with S**, elder in Achin district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023; Interview with A**, elder, Salafi, in Marwara district, Kunar Province, September 2023; Interview with *S*, elder in Naziyaan district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023; Interview with **K, elder in Sarkano district, Kunar Province, September 2023; Interview with **B, elder in Behsud district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023; Interview with *N*, elder in Alingar district, Laghman Province, October 2023.
[66] Interview with **K, elder in Khogyani district, Nangarhar Province, October 2023.
[67] Interview with *M*, elder, Pashai, in Kamdish district, Nuristan Province, October 2023.
[68] Interview with *A*, elder in Wama district, Nuristan Province, October 2023.
[69] Interview with *N*, elder in Alingar district, Laghman Province, October 2023; Interview with *A*, elder in Wama district, Nuristan Province, October 2023.

Having been told to report local occurrences to the authorities, elders have reported local Taliban commanders for killing previous government officials for revenge, arresting villagers without any evidence or court decision, and harassing villagers, among many other reasons, but no action has been taken—and the abuses continue (at least in the east).[70] In the words of one of the elders:

The governor and his secretary noted all our advice, suggestions, and complaints and gave promises that he would reach to our problems and will follow our advice and suggestions, but we don't see any changes—only one or two small things that we had complaints about a few Taliban members. They were sacked from their positions to make the people happy, but there are lots of other important corruptions and bribes among important Taliban officials, but those ones have not been resolved.[71]

As under the previous government, according to this elder, the policy of relying on elders may be nothing more than lip service: "Those elders who have good connections with the Taliban, their suggestions, their advice, and [their] complaints will be heard soon but not from other elders—especially those elders who were close to the previous government."[72] Another elder mentioned the case of a district governor of Shinwar who was spreading the gospel of the new policy; apparently, this governor was directly involved in the harassment of villagers, and his fighters were poorly behaved.[73] A widely shared point among the interviewed elders was that the Taliban authorities are much more responsive to complaints that are not aimed at Taliban members (especially senior members).[74]

Many are simply afraid to raise complaints about Taliban members, viewing doing so as risky:

At this time, no elders will help any villager who has a problem with a Taliban commander or Taliban member because raising a problem against Taliban members [gets] you into trouble.[75]

Another complaint among villagers is that the Taliban are so focused on security issues that they ignore other concerns, including those pertaining to education, health, and economics.[76] The

[70] Interview with **G, elder in Shinwar district, Nangarhar Province, March 2022; Interview with **W, elder in Nari district, Kunar Province, March 2022; Interview with **Q, elder in Barg Matal district, Nuristan Province, March 2022.
[71] Interview with **Q, elder in Barg Matal district, Nuristan Province, March 2022.
[72] Interview with **Q, elder in Barg Matal district, Nuristan Province, March 2022.
[73] Interview with **G, elder, Nangarhar Province, March 2022.
[74] Interview with *M*, elder, Salafi, in Watapur district, Kunar Province, September 2023; Interview with S**, elder in Achin district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023; Interview with A**, elder, Salafi, in Marwara district, Kunar Province, September 2023; Interview with *S*, elder in Naziyaan district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023; Interview with **K, elder in Sarkano district, Kunar Province, September 2023; Interview with **B, elder in Behsud district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023; Interview with *N*, elder in Alingar district, Laghman Province, October 2023.
[75] Interview with **K, elder in Sarkano district, Kunar Province, September 2023.
[76] Interview with **R, elder in Behsud district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023; Interview with **W, elder in Dur Baba district, Nangarhar Province, October 2023.

Taliban's focus on collecting taxes (without providing services) is another prominent complaint.[77] Taliban members reportedly discuss the potential need to raise taxes and the duty to report security issues with all elders but only discuss matters pertaining to aid with loyal supporters.[78] The new qariadars report to the Taliban and resolve disputes but do not bring any projects or jobs; thus, they are widely deemed to be useless.[79] Many complain that, with the help of the elders that it has appointed as its village counterparts, the Taliban compiles lists of sympathetic households, who are then privileged in the distribution of available aid.[80] Yet another problem raised by the elders is the fact that some Taliban commanders behave aggressively toward both elders and villagers, though opinions are divided on the prominence of this problem.[81]

Overall, most elders view the Taliban as clumsy insurgents turned administrators who are unable to shed their baggage and generally struggle to deal with villagers.[82] Their opinions are divided over whether this is a teething problem or something more structural. Some elders believe that the Taliban are steadily learning—that they simply need time to overcome these issues.[83] In the view of the most articulate defender of the Taliban's record among the interviewees:

We should give time for the Taliban until they learn governance and they learn how to deal and behave with villagers and people. Most of the Taliban officials in the government departments are military commanders and have been in the mountains for 20 years; they need time to learn proper and responsible governance in Afghanistan. There are some Taliban members who behave very well and listen to complaints and problems, but there are some Taliban members who don't listen to anyone and are full of pride in their victory and are very aggressive.[84]

Others believe that the Taliban are only interested in working closely with their sympathizers, whom some elders refer to as "andiwal," and that the fact of having had to fight for 20 years is nothing but an excuse.[85] One of the sources even doubted that qariadars were being listened to by the Taliban.[86]

Notably, there are allegations of corruption against the Emirate's courts—of money being paid to win cases.[87] There are also allegations of favouritism and nepotism toward Taliban members and of

[77] Interview with A**, elder, Salafi, in Marwara district, Kunar Province, September 2023.
[78] Interview with A**, elder, Salafi, in Marwara district, Kunar Province, September 2023.
[79] Interview with **W, elder in Dur Baba district, Nangarhar Province, October 2023.
[80] Interview with A**, elder, Salafi, in Marwara district, Kunar Province, September 2023.
[81] Interview with **R, elder in Behsud district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023; Interview with *S*, elder in Naziyaan district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023; Interview with **W, elder in Dur Baba district, Nangarhar Province, October 2023.
[82] Interview with **W, elder in Dur Baba district, Nangarhar Province, October 2023; Interview with ***, Salafi scholar and sheikh in Dangam district, Kunar Province, September 2023; Interview with A**, elder, Salafi, in Marwara district, Kunar Province, September 2023; Interview with **K, elder in Sarkano district, Kunar Province, September 2023; Interview with *S*, elder in Naziyaan district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023.
[83] Interview with H**, elder in Amla village, Khewa district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023.
[84] Interview with *N*, elder in Alingar district, Laghman Province, October 2023.
[85] Interview with *A*, elder in Wama district, Nuristan Province, October 2023.
[86] Interview with **K, elder in Sarkano district, Kunar Province, September 2023.
[87] Interview with *M*, elder, Salafi, in Watapur district, Kunar Province, September 2023.

members getting away with serious crimes.[88] Importantly, the courts are also reported to favour Hanafis over Salafis.[89] Overall, however, the courts seem generally popular.[90] Even elders who allege that the courts suffer from corruption and favouritism acknowledge that they are popular among villagers, demonstrated by the fact that tribal jirgas "are not happening a lot as the villagers are willing to take their cases to the Taliban courts."[91]

Why the Taliban's "Embrace" May Have Faltered

Determining precisely why the Taliban's "embrace" policy petered off so quickly is beyond the scope of this paper. However, some of the interviewees suggested a plausible explanation, especially concerning the failure of the Emirate to respond effectively to complaints. One elder in Nuristan noted that the Taliban's provincial and district-level officials have a high degree of autonomy—more by default than by design:

In Nuristan Province, every Taliban commander is the leader of himself, and they don't hear and obey much from other Taliban leaders. The orders of the Nuristan governor don't work or [are] not acceptable in many districts [when it comes to] the district governors because each district governor has a very deep connection with Taliban leaders in Kabul, and they don't care for the [provincial] governor much.[92]

In turn, even these local officials struggle to exercise strict command and control over lower-level Taliban officials:

local Taliban commanders and officials are not obeying much the provincial officials [or] the governor of the Taliban. Due to some Taliban commanders belonging to some important Taliban officials or belonging to a different group of the Taliban, they don't listen a lot to the orders of the governor or other provincial officials. There are lots of district governors who don't care about the provincial governor, and, sometimes, they don't accept his orders. As the provincial governor is not from Kunar, [the Kunari Taliban] don't care about him […]. For example, the Haqqani network working as district governors or in other positions don't care much about the orders of the provincial officials, who belong to the southern Taliban…[93]

[88] Interview with A**, elder, Salafi, in Marwara district, Kunar Province, September 2023; Interview with *S*, elder in Naziyaan district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023.
[89] Interview with **M, elder, Salafi, in Asmaar district, Kunar Province, October 2023.
[90] Interview with *A*, elder in Wama district, Nuristan Province, October 2023.
[91] Interview with **W, elder in Dur Baba district, Nangarhar Province, October 2023; Interview with *N*, elder in Alingar district, Laghman Province, October 2023.
[92] Interview with **Q, elder in Barg Matal district, Nuristan Province, March 2022.
[93] Interview with **W, elder in Nari district, Kunar Province, March 2022.

Another elder concurred that one major problem is the weak integration that characterizes the Taliban's system: "every Taliban member or commander is a power onto himself, and they are the kings of their own areas"; this implies that Taliban officials may be unable to follow up on complaints even if they wanted to.[94]

Another factor contributing to the failure of the "embrace" policy may be the Taliban's failure to systematically set up (or allow elders to set up) a system of district-level and provincial elder councils, which would facilitate collective action by elders and increase their weight relative to the Taliban. Indeed, in one province where such councils existed and the governor agreed to work with them, the "embrace" policy seems to have worked far better: Baghlan had district-level councils comprising senior tribal elders and village representatives, and these councils regularly met with district-level and provincial authorities to "solve the problem of the villagers and develop the district". According to one elder, "We have given lots of advice and suggestions regarding good governance in our district, and we see some changes."[95] He denied that the Taliban were handpicking elders to represent the villages and confirmed that "based on our complaints and decisions, several Taliban fighters in our district have been arrested because they were misusing their positions and disturbed the villagers. An important Taliban local official has been sacked from his position because of our decision." The elder expressed his satisfaction with the fact that the Taliban were more willing than the previous regime to act against abuses committed by its own members.[96] These councils, where they existed, were a mere local initiative; they were certainly not replicated everywhere.

The Taliban's Attitude Toward the Salafi Community

This section focuses on the Salafi community in eastern Afghanistan, which has in the past been targeted by IS-K for recruitment. For the purposes of this paper, the authors define the "Salafi community" as all followers of these networks and groups and define "Salafi clerics" as these followers' mullahs and ulema. Whether Salafism is actually alien to Hanafism is an ongoing debate with which this paper does not engage. Suffice it to say that there is a Salafi identity in Afghanistan that is distinct from the Hanafi identity.

Most of the interviewees alleged that Salafis are simply not represented in the district-level and village shuras, which consist entirely of Taliban sympathizers.[97] In reality, some Salafis have even been appointed as qariadars, as indicated by one such appointee.[98] Large numbers of Salafis still sit in

[94] Interview with *M*, elder, Pashai, in Kamdish district, Nuristan Province, October 2023.
[95] Interview with ***A, elder in Dahn-i-Ghori district, Baghlan Province, March 2022.
[96] Interview with ***A, elder in Dahn-i-Ghori district, Baghlan Province, March 2022.
[97] Interview with A**, elder, Salafi, in Sorkhrod district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023.
[98] Interview with *M*, elder, Salafi, in Watapur district, Kunar Province, September 2023.

village elder shuras, even if they may feel that their role is purely "symbolic" or that the Taliban does not listen to them much.[99] The Taliban is not keen on meeting Salafi elders or other notable Salafi individuals, and Taliban officials tend not to visit them when they are in the villages.[100]

Another major complaint among Salafi elders is that they are not free to practice their religion as they see fit: "The lives of Salafi followers are like being in prison, and we don't have permission to follow our religion."[101] Reports indicate that Taliban police and officials often behave aggressively toward Salafi elders.[102]

To what extent does this predicament set the Salafi community of eastern Afghanistan apart from the rest of the population (or at least from the rest of the Pashtuns of Afghanistan)? One elder noted that there is a substantial number of Hanafis who do not like the Taliban but have resigned themselves to its new regime.

Most of our village and district people are "Hanafi Pashtuns," and part of them are [Taliban] sympathizers […], and their mood regarding the Taliban is very good. But there are lots of "Hanafi Pashtun" in our village and district who don't like the Taliban's government [or] policies. These Hanafi Pashtun families don't encounter many problems with the Taliban because they are Pashtuns and Hanafi, so they are safe, but these families don't like to work with the Taliban and are not [Taliban] sympathizers.[103]

At the same time, however, some notable Salafis acknowledge that not all Salafis are hostile to the Taliban.

There are some Salafi villagers who have connections with the Taliban and have people among the Taliban; they are also good with the Taliban and want the Taliban […]. Among the Salafi villagers in our district, 70% have problems with the Taliban and don't like the Taliban, and the remaining 30% have links with the Taliban and have supporters there; that's why they like the Taliban and don't care much about their religion, which is under threat from the Taliban.[104]

Although the picture is somewhat mixed, the Salafi community does appear to be significantly worse off than Hanafi Pashtuns, at least in the east, validating the sense of disenfranchisement among Salafi interviewees. As discussed above, pro-Taliban elders are more effective because they are better

[99] Interview with A**, elder, Salafi, in Marwara district, Kunar Province, September 2023.
[100] Interview with A**, elder, Salafi, in Sorkhrod district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023.
[101] Interview with A**, elder, Salafi, in Sorkhrod district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023.
[102] Interview with **M, elder, Salafi, in Asmaar district, Kunar Province, October 2023.
[103] Interview with A**, elder, Salafi, in Sorkhrod district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023.
[104] Interview with ***, Salafi scholar and sheikh in Dangam district, Kunar Province, September 2023.

positioned to take up issues with the Taliban; however, if they favour Hanafis over Salafis, they cannot get support from the Salafi villagers.[105] Nonetheless, the pragmatists within the Salafi community argue that a violent confrontation with the Emirate is not an option—even if the community feels that "we are in a jail under the Taliban and Emirate regime". "What should we do? We don't have the power to fight the Taliban, and we [leave] everything to Allah to punish those people in Taliban who are against Salafism."[106] This pragmatic position seems to have gained traction following the first few months of turmoil under the new regime, especially given that the Taliban's animosity toward Salafis began abating within a few months after the takeover.

I decided to stay quiet and live like a normal villager. When the Taliban came to power and showed their aggressive behaviour against the Salafi religious [adherents], I left the district for several months and, when the situation improved, I returned to my village and, since that time, have lived as a normal villager. I knew that if I introduced myself as an elder who follows the Salafi religion in our district, I might [have a] problem. […] That's why the Taliban don't have a problem with me, but I am sure that I am under the secret observation of the Taliban."[107]

Role of Religious Networks in Local Governance

The role of religious networks and actors has been important throughout the history of local governance relations in Afghanistan. Religious actors in villages have always been respected and consulted on a variety of matters. What is clear since the Taliban's return to power is an increase in such actors' authority, even if some sources allege that warrior mullahs are lacking in popularity, as one elder in Wardak noted:

Religious scholars are good, and people have no problem with them. These scholars are also sons of this nation; they know and respect the dignity of their people. In comparison to the past, their authority has increased in local shuras. We also used to consult our religious scholars in the past, and we continue to do the same now. The only type of Mullah that does not respect communities and is not popular is the military mullah (Nezami Mullayan). They are not respecting the people.[108]

[105] Interview with **M, elder, Salafi, in Asmaar district, Kunar Province, October 2023.
[106] Interview with [name withheld], Salafi scholar and sheikh in Dangam district, Kunar Province, September 2023.
[107] Interview with *G*, elder, Salafi, in Alingar district, Laghman Province, October 2023.
[108] Interview with [name withheld], village representative in Jaghatu district, Wardak Province, October 2023.

Localities vary in whether mullahs have a direct role in administrative and representative functions. In some localities, local mullahs maintain their distance from official roles, but in others, they may actually serve as representatives. Often, mullahs see qariadar roles as "dirty" and unworthy of their stature.[109]

Importantly, however, mullahs have always been involved in dispute resolution, but under Taliban rule, the role of Hanafi scholars who supported or were sympathetic to the Taliban has increased significantly. The informal district-level ulema councils and village mullahs both continue to intervene in local disputes.[110] According to one interviewee from Laghman, when a dispute between two parties is referred to the local district-level council of ulema, two local mullahs are expected to act as observers and "third-party" figures in the mediation between two hostile sides. Once the decision is finalized, it is recorded in the district's official gazette.[111]

This judicial role is particularly important because, according to most interviewees, the district-level court system is highly dysfunctional; nearly all cases, including many criminal cases, are simply referred to district-level religious councils. The only exceptions are security-related issues, which are directly handled by the GDI and the courts.[112]

The interviewees differed in terms of whether they came from a locality in which Salafi ulema and mullahs boast a strong presence or one in which they have a weak presence. In some areas, they are wholly excluded from village- or district-level affairs, while in others, if they have influence within their communities and are not perceived as a potential threat by the Taliban, they continue to lead. For instance, as of October 2023, two Panjpiri[113] mullahs are members of the shura in one village in Kuz Kunar (Nangarhar), as they are perceived as highly influential—even by the pro-Taliban PUC.[114] In contrast, interviewees in Jaghatu (Wardak) indicated that, although they knew of "Wahabis" (a term used improperly in Afghanistan as a mischaracterisation of all Salafis) being present in some areas, the local population and Hanafi scholars are hostile toward them.[115]

[109] Interview with [name withheld], village elder in Kama district, Nangarhar Province, October 2023.
[110] Interview with [name withheld], village health worker in Alingar district, Laghman Province, September 2023.
[111] Interview with [name withheld], village elder in Alingar district, Laghman Province, September 2023.
[112] Interview with [name withheld], village elder in Alingar district, Laghman Province, September 2023; Interview with [name withheld], village health worker in Alingar district, Laghman Province, September 2023; Interview with [name withheld], village representative in Jaghatu district, Wardak Province, October 2023.
[113] The term "Panjpiri" refers to the Panjpir madrasa in Pakistan, the doctrine of which overlaps with Salafism without being fully identifiable as such. See the following: K. Mielke and N. Miszak, "Making sense of Daesh in Afghanistan: A Social Movement Perspective" (BICC Working Paper, 6/2017). Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC), 32–3.
[114] Interview with [name withheld], village elder in Koz Kunar district, Nangarhar Province, October 2023.
[115] Interview with [name withheld], village representative in Jaghatu district, Wardak Province, October 2023.

The Taiban's Attitude Toward the Salafi clerics

In the eastern region, there was in recent decades a surge in different religious groups setting up activities, such as building madrasas and mosques and leading religious sermons. As a result, religious actors and networks there belong to various schools of thought within Sunni Islam. The interviewees named Ahl-e Hadith, Wahabis, Salafis, and Panjpiri among the religious networks with a presence in the eastern region.[116] Clearly, there is much confusion over these new networks that have established themselves in Afghanistan since the 1970s and that could be, as a whole, described as "Salafi." The ulema who identify as "Salafi" deny the existence of any divisions within Salafism, and it is not entirely clear whether there are real Wahabis or Ahl-e Hadith in Afghanistan; the prevailing form of Salafism seems to be Hanafi-Salafi.[117] Thus, one may question whether it is possible to speak of a distinct Salafi sect in Afghanistan. It also appears that the "Daesh" doctrine, as it was dubbed by the interviewees, refers to what is more widely known as Salafi-jihadism (as opposed to quietist Salafism).[118] There is no doubt, however, that interviewees on all sides perceived the existence of a distinct Salafi community. There is no need to enter a complex technological or doctrinal debate here.[119]

Unsurprisingly, the Taliban is suspicious of Salafis, whom they suspect of associating with IS-K.[120] Indeed, with few exceptions, Salafi elders are adamant that they are discriminated against by the Taliban, even in areas where there is no longer any IS-K activity.[121]

Multiple interviewees confirmed that, following the systematic efforts by the Taliban to disrupt and destroy Salafi networks in the eastern region over the past two years, their role and presence in the region have fallen, with some declaring them to be completely obedient (Bai'at) to the Taliban leaders (if they haven't yet escaped or been arrested, disappeared, or killed). Hanafi scholars are very clearly in the lead, enjoying strong support from the regime.[122]

The hostility toward the Salafis is in part attributable to the perception that generous funding from donors in the Gulf countries resulted in free boarding madrasa attracting students from poor families; this, in turn, enabled them to gradually convert to Salafism, resulting in Salafism spreading

[116] Interview with [name withheld], provincial district officer in Laghman Province, September 2023.
[117] For more information on Hanafi Salafism, see: Shaykh Dr. Haitham Al-Haddad, "Hanafi Salafism: An Oxymoron?," *Islam21c*, November 12, 2013.
[118] See Quintan Wiktorowicz, "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 29 (2006).
[119] For a more detailed discussion, see: Joshua Pease and James Hess, "The Convergence of Subsects: Defining Where Deobandi and Salafi Subsects Intersect," *Global Security and Intelligence Studies* 6, no. 1 (2021).
[120] For more on this point, see: Antonio Giustozzi, "The Taliban's Campaign Against the Islamic State: Explaining Initial Successes," *RUSI*, October 25, 2023.
[121] As in, for example, Sorkhrod: Interview with A**, elder, Salafi, in Sorkhrod district, Nangarhar Province, September 2023.
[122] Interview with ** University professor in Nangarhar Province, October 2023.

at the expense of conventional Hanafism.[123] Therefore, there is a degree of widespread satisfaction within the Hanafi community that the expansion of Salafism has been halted (and is potentially even being rolled back). Among Hanafis, there is a common perception that pledging Bai'at to the Taliban's Amir turns Salafis back into Hanafis. Surely, the closure or seizure of most Salafi madrasas by Hanafis—and sometimes even the replacement of mosque imams with Hanafi ones—must be diminishing the Salafi community's ability to continue spreading or even maintain its current numbers.[124]

Conclusion

This report highlighted how local governance relations have evolved since the Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in August 2021 and assessed the role of various religious actors in local governance. Although it is still very early to make such deductions with certainty, it appears as though the Taliban leadership's approach to governance is heavily centralized and authoritarian, even if the patterns of influence in appointments and decision-making remain poorly understood. In terms of formal governance structure, relatively little has changed from the previous regime; to the extent that things have changed, these changes have represented a return to the standards of Afghanistan's monarchy (pre-1978). It is important to note that the Taliban's state, at least in the temporary form that it has taken in 2021–2024, has at least one major peculiarity when compared to other systems in Afghanistan's past: the unresolved tension between the Kandahar-based supreme leadership and the Kabul-based executive, which has led to a power struggle between the two centres of power. Some developments (e.g., the emergence of the PUCs) point toward the emergence of a dualistic power structure; at the time of writing, however, it is too early to determine whether this trend is likely to continue.

The focus of this report was on Taliban governance at the village level. Here, too, there are many similarities between the current system and past systems. Like all previous regimes, the Taliban want qariadars and maliks in place who are sympathetic to or at least neutral toward it. This desire requires the replacement of most previous occupants of these roles. There was a clear shift between the early months following the Taliban takeover and the later period: The Taliban initially appeared far more enthusiastic about working closely with village elders. These elders, who are not chosen by the Taliban and whose role is to represent villagers, were (by late 2023) highly skeptical of the Taliban's ability to help villagers beyond the provision of security and were sometimes even hostile toward the Taliban. The fact that the Taliban has little to offer villagers due to its lack of financial

[123] Interview with ** provincial district officer in Laghman Province, September 2023.
[124] Interview with ** village 2 elder in Koz Kunar district, Nangarhar Province, October 2023.

resources hinders its ability to remedy elders' concerns. Within the Taliban, there is significant pressure to keep limited resources within the organisation and its sympathizers—nothing new in the history of Afghanistan.

There are two additional significant changes from the republican period. The first is the Taliban's unprecedented presence at the local level (in terms of intelligence and control) and outreach to localities. Under the republic, security deterioration resulted in less than half of the districts having a real government presence. The second is the lack of developmental projects in the villages, which undermines social stability and, in turn, long-run political stability.

The sluggish (to say the least) adaptation of the Taliban to a mode of governance suitable for a state (as opposed to an insurgent organization) is a key aspect of the picture portrayed by this paper. Aside from top-level intra-Taliban friction (which evidence does not show affecting local governance), the Taliban remains poorly integrated even at the bottom of its structure. Insurgency-era fronts persist with the personal loyalties that characterized them, disrupting the chain of command in the districts and provinces and fostering the spread of clientelist attitudes. Based on the data collected, it does not appear as though the current Taliban regime has a strategy to deal with this.

With the Taliban in almost complete military control of the countryside, one interesting dimension of their governance system is the establishment of the PUCs in a supervisory role. While the authors do not have enough information to determine whether the PUCs are having any material impact on Taliban governance, they certainly constitute a topic worthy of further investigation.

In eastern Afghanistan, which hosts most of the Salafi community, the Taliban faces particular challenges. There is a clear distrust between the Taliban and most Salafi communities. The Taliban views Salafis as the main social base of IS-K in Afghanistan; conversely, the Salafis resent being profiled as pro-IS-K and being excluded from positions of influence. Although the Taliban appeared seriously concerned by the threat posed by IS-K in 2021–2022, as of late 2023, the Taliban does not appear to perceive the residual IS-K presence in the east as a strategic threat. Nonetheless, given its limited support among the villagers, the Taliban will certainly struggle to eradicate IS-K from the region once and for all.

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