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FOR THE STUDY AND RESOLUTION OF GLOBAL CONFLICTS

The Pearson Global Forum Part IV. Restoring Social Order

Local Statebuilding in Afghanistan featuring Jennifer Murtazashvili, Associate Professor and Director of the International Development Program, Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, University of Pittsburgh

JENNIFER MURTAZSHVILI: So, I'd like to take you to a village in northern Afghanistan. And in this village, you're gonna meet one of the most inspirational leaders I've met during more than two decades of doing research and policy work, in central Eurasia. I'd like you to meet a traditional leader of a village, who's not showing up. Oops! Okay. That's the last slide.

There we go. That's the first slide, and here is our traditional leader. Let's call her Fatima. Fatima was an incredible leader. On the day that I visited her home, I saw her pink guest room, where she received mostly men, to talk about property disputes, help people solve problems that arose. She also tried to help people access government services, that was difficult for them to do without her.

I'll never forget watching her jump on a Soviet [inaudible 07:38:10] in her courtyard. She said that every spring, she flattened the roads in her village, because of the rains. The rains made things very uneven. She said, "If only we had asphalt." She could solve this problem once and for all. But, she couldn't. Her community couldn't afford that level of public goods.

Fatima had this incredible energy that was infectious. She believed that, by changing her community, she could change her country. She'd come to power through a largely deliberative process in her community. She said that her father was a respected religious leader, and that people trusted her to solve problems as they arose. She said she treated her community with love. A couple of years later, I came back to her district. I wanted to see what had happened to Fatima. The security situation in her community had deteriorated significantly, unfortunately. I met with the district governor. I said, "Do you know Fatima? Can I find her?" He says, "Of course I know her. Come back in a couple of days, and I'll bring her to you."

I came back, I saw her enter his dark office, I saw her beautiful smile, but I could see that the spirit behind it had changed. She sat down beside me, and she said, "You'll never believe what's happened to me." And she was right. Her story flowed as swiftly as her tears.

She said that, just a few months before, she was traveling from her village, to Kabul, about a seven hour drive in good weather. About halfway to Kabul, she stopped at this famous mountaintop restaurant, that was known for its tasteful kebab. As she and her driver were exiting the restaurant, they were accosted by some criminals who wanted to steal her car. She said that her arms were bound, and she was thrown in the trunk of her car. She somehow ended up in a river nearby.



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She says that she prayed for her life. She says, "Why is this happening to me? I have done nothing but try to help the people in my village. I have not taken a penny, I have not taken a cent. I've only tried to help those people around me." She says she cut her arm on a branch, and was able to get herself out of that river. She confronted the people who attached her, who saw her as a ghost. They were locked up in jail.

But Fatima's problems didn't end that day. She was receiving almost daily death threats from criminal gangs affiliated with those people who had attacked her, asking her to pay a bride to the government to secure their release. She was deeply disappointed with her government's inability to protect her.

Fatima's story represents an amazing paradox. She's a woman, who climbed the ranks of traditional authority, in rural Afghanistan. Her story illustrates the incredible legitimacy that people like her, dozens of people like her, who I met during months and months of field work looking at villages throughout rural Afghanistan, to try to understand why things work so well, and why things fail.

She was able to climb the ranks of traditional authority, and gain legitimacy in her community because she was constrained in her power to act. So, in my research, I tried to understand why people like Fatima ... And, she was the only woman I found who was a customary leader of her village. I found mostly men. But I tried to understand; why customary authority remains so legitimate in rural Afghanistan, and why the government struggled to gain the same kind of legitimacy.

And what I found was a very interesting story. I found that in communities, power is actually diffuse. Power is not concentrated in single hands. So, when customary authority works well, you find power is separated between three distinct bodies. I found village councils, which represents every household in the community. They meet to resolve issues when disputes arise. You have religious leaders who derive their authority from Islam. And then, you have people like Fatima; village leaders.

In Afghanistan, there are no chiefs, there's no [inaudible 07:42:47] lords. These are first among equals. [foreign language 07:42:50], who rule communities with the legitimacy of those they govern. Not only is power separated in communities, more importantly, there are checks and balances that exists between these three distinct sources of power. And, these checks and balances serve to constrain power of these individual leaders.

For example, I found a Mullah in one community who banned music classes for young people. People in the village were not too happy about that. So, slowly but truly, they convinced the Mullah to back off. Sometimes I heard stories about village leader who took too much, as they tried to provide services for the government. And village councils would inevitably, and slowly but surely, come in and either switch out that leader, or convince him, or her, to change their ways.



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So, it was these constraints on power that gave local leaders legitimacy. They were able to provide public good, and get people to trust them with their money, to provide resources, because they were constrained. And, these constraints yield legitimacy. And, this legitimacy was the source of trust in communities.

If we compare this to the state, the Afghan state, people in villages throughout the countryside experienced the government in the exact same way that they had for the past 60 years. Although, the president and the parliament, were elected in far away Kabul, there was no local democracy in districts throughout the country. At the local level, all government officials continued to be appointed by Kabul. These officials are not constrained at all.

People work in Afghanistan, there's many of us here today, we disagree about many, many things. We disagree about the ways to move forward, but we do agree on one thing. And, it is this predatory behavior on the part of government official, that is driving the continued insurgency in Afghanistan.

So, the international donor community also made a series of missteps in Afghanistan. And one of them was diagnosing the problem. In the days after 2001, there was an assumption that in communities throughout the countryside, there was a tabula rasa. There was a vacuum of authority that needed to be rebuilt by new kinds of councils that could come into communities very quickly and provide people with public goods and services, give them grants, give them things, show them that the government can work for them, win hearts and minds, through service delivery, through infrastructure.

So, the World Bank and the government of Afghanistan created an ambitious new program that saw to create 30000 new community councils in rural Afghanistan, to replace the [inaudible 07:45:55] of traditional authority that many people thought were a [inaudible 07:45:58] of conservatism, that undermined democracy. In my own statistical analysis, I found that in communities that had these new councils, had more property disputes and were less likely to solve these disputes when they rose.

The World Bank's own randomized control trial found that governance outcomes in communities that had these new councils, were actually worse than those that did not. These efforts to give people things, and provide public goods and services, actually undermined the state building process.

So, as we think about the lessons from this story, from the Fatimas, from the sources of legitimacy that exists in communities from Afghanistan, I think we're gonna talk about how countries can move ahead from fragility to stability. And what are ways to do this? And what are the lessons? What can we draw from Afghanistan, where everything seems to have not gone so well? One thing that we should take away from what we know about this country is that in cases of conflict, we should expect that people are quite capable of solving problems in the most extreme circumstances. What I found in rural Afghanistan, where people were able to solve problems, they designed institutions, they reinvented customary authority, they updated the rules by which it operated, because people were no longer



content to be subject to a distant government in Kabul. But, what they experienced from the state was the same treatment that they had before.

Another lesson we should consider is that, as we think about state building, or stabilization, or whatever we're calling it these days, we need to think less about building state capacity. We need to think more about tying the hands of government officials so they cannot engage in predation.

There's a lot of evidence about what's going on in Afghanistan over the past 15 years. The evidence that giving people stuff, and infrastructure, wins hearts and minds is highly questionable. What I found is that Afghans didn't want things from their government. They wanted to be treated with respect. They wanted to be treated with dignity. They wanted to be able to go to a government office and not be asked for a bride. They wanted a government official to help them solve a land dispute, with dignity. They wanted to be treated with respect. And, as Fatima reminds us, you can only earn that respect with love.