

The Role of Ethnic Leaders in the Political Developments of Afghanistan During the Republic Period (2001-2021)

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ABSTRACT

Research problem: This article examines the role of ethnic leaders in Afghanistan's political developments during the Republic period (2001-2021) and highlights their influence in various areas. Ethnic leaders, representing diverse ethnic groups in Afghanistan, played a crucial role in shaping the political landscape and balancing traditional power structures with modern state institutions. **Methodology:** Based on data collected through semi-structured interviews, this research was coded, categorized, and analyzed using grounded theory. **Key findings:** Ethnic leaders' footprints can be observed in most of the country's political, economic, and social transformations and challenges in recent decades. Corruption, factionalism, ongoing insurgencies, financial dependency on foreign aid, and the illegal drug trade were among the major issues that weakened the Afghan government, problems directly linked to ethnic leaders' actions. **Implications:** This study concludes that sustainable economic development, good governance, democracy, and genuine political reforms are essential for political stability in Afghanistan. Its findings contribute to a deeper understanding of Afghanistan's political complexities and offer insights into nation-building and resolving both national and international conflicts.

1. Introduction

Afghanistan has been directly and indirectly involved in war for over three decades, with various countries entering the Afghan battlefield, while the Afghan people have endured the greatest hardships. The colonization and exploitation of Afghanistan continued until 1996, when the Taliban, claiming to represent the people and emerging from within Afghan society, came to power, imposing five dark years on the Afghan people until 2001. After the events of

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September 11, NATO forces entered Afghan soil, and in the eyes of the Taliban, Afghanistan became occupied by the United States. The shadow of war, chaos, and insecurity weighed heavily on Afghanistan up until 2021 when the Taliban once again regained power within just a few weeks (Zarbigalehhamami and others, 2023: 27-28).

The Republic period in Afghanistan, spanning from 2001 to 2021, marks a significant era characterized by profound political transformations and enduring conflicts. Central to these developments were ethnic leaders who wielded substantial influence, shaping the nation's political landscape. This research paper aims to delve into the pivotal role played by these leaders, examining their contributions, strategies, and the broader implications of their actions within Afghanistan's complex socio-political framework.

Ethnic leaders in Afghanistan, representing diverse groups such as the Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks, emerged as key political actors following the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001. Their influence was not merely a reflection of demographic realities but also a product of historical legacies and socio-political networks that extended deep into Afghanistan's intricate tapestry of tribal affiliations and loyalties. As noted by Giustozzi (2009), these leaders often operated at the intersection of traditional power structures and modern state institutions, navigating a delicate balance between their ethnic constituencies and the central government.

The Bonn Agreement of 2001, which laid the foundation for Afghanistan's political reconstruction, underscored the importance of inclusive governance and power-sharing among various ethnic groups (Barfield, 2010). This framework gave ethnic leaders formal political avenues to assert their influence, thus becoming indispensable players in the national dialogue. Their roles were further cemented by their participation in key political processes, including drafting the 2004 Constitution, the 2005 and 2010 parliamentary elections, and subsequent presidential elections (Ruttig, 2014).

However, ethnic leaders' impact extended beyond formal political institutions. They were instrumental in mobilizing support, mediating conflicts, and fostering alliances that often transcended ethnic lines. This was particularly evident during critical junctures such as the 2009 and 2014 presidential elections, where alliances among ethnic leaders played decisive roles in the outcomes (Larson, 2016). Additionally, their ability to influence local governance and security dynamics, especially in rural areas, underscored their enduring relevance in Afghanistan's fragmented political landscape (Coburn, 2011).

Ethnic leaders were key in Afghanistan's political developments from 2001 to 2021. Their role was multifaceted, including political leadership, mediation in conflicts, and fostering social cohesion. In a country like Afghanistan, where there is significant ethnic diversity, the position and role of ethnic leaders naturally hold great significance in this context.

Ethnic leaders, as an unofficial power that influence many political and economic relations of the country, have received less attention from researchers and critics. Providing a correct understanding of the role of ethnic leaders in the developments of the last two decades in Afghanistan can be significantly useful for both people and researchers. In fact, ethnic leaders, as one of the sides of the power structure in Afghanistan, have always played a role in the macro and minor policies of this country, and without knowing and understanding their role, it is impossible to study and research in this field. Nevertheless, in this research, an attempt is made to provide a correct understanding of the role of ethnic leaders by relying on the opinions and views of the participants.

This research seeks to provide a different analysis of the role of ethnic leaders in the most important political developments in Afghanistan over the past two decades. Examining their actions in the areas of political affairs, economic resource management, and organizing social

groups during the Republic period are among the main objectives of this study. By exploring these issues, we will gain a better understanding of the complex interaction between ethnicity, leadership, and politics amid Afghanistan's political transformations in the early 21st century.

Based on the problem statement and the primary objective of this study—examining the role of ethnic leaders in the political developments during Afghanistan's Republic era using grounded theory—the core research questions are as follows:

- What role did ethnic leaders play in the most significant political events of the Republic era in Afghanistan, such as the Bonn Conference and presidential elections?
- What is the position of ethnic leaders in shaping the current state of Afghanistan?
- What tools did ethnic leaders rely on to solidify their role in Afghanistan's political developments?

This study is qualitative. In qualitative research, where the goal is to explore and discover the state of a variable, a hypothesis is not necessary. The political developments in the period of the republican period are exactly the same issue that we seek to study the role of ethnic leaders in them. Considering the method adopted in this research and of course expressing the views and opinions of the participants, the role of ethnic leaders will be better and more deeply expressed in the mentioned context.

2. Prior Researches

Azami and Hamidi (2023) concluded that ethno-religious divisions play a pivotal role in perpetuating the country's political crisis. These divisions, compounded by economic weaknesses, have not only undermined governmental authority but also fostered a quasi-tribal governance system, bolstering opposition forces. Consequently, a collective ethnic identity often supersedes a unified national identity. Ayati (2022) argued that ethnicity, kinship, religion, and tradition, along with external influences, have historically shaped Afghanistan's political landscape. Rahmani (2020) criticized Afghan leaders for squandering political opportunities on fruitless internal conflicts instead of addressing national deprivation and suffering. He argues that this has marginalized them from the political mainstream. Sadeghi (2019) underscored the influence of elites and ethnic tribal cultures on political participation in Afghanistan. He criticized the exclusion of non-ruling elite groups from significant decision-making processes, relegating them to symbolic roles. Satari, Fallah, and Qasemi (2018) echoed Azami and Hamidi's findings on the centrality of ethno-religious divisions in Afghanistan's political turmoil. They emphasized how these divisions, exacerbated by economic fragility, have perpetuated a fragmented political landscape, prioritizing ethnic identities over national unity. Rafi and Jami (2015), in "Challenges to Peace in Afghanistan," criticized international intervention for failing to understand Afghanistan's complex societal structure and inadvertently destabilizing the nation. They argued that sustainable peace requires respecting Afghanistan's national interests rather than solely pursuing foreign powers' agendas.

Although several critical researches have been conducted in the field of politics and ethnicity in Afghanistan, focusing on the role of ethnic leaders in the political developments of this country, relying on the votes and opinions of citizens of different ethnicities, is the innovation of this research. As will be mentioned, ethnic leaders in Afghanistan have played a very prominent role in policy-making and executive decisions, and their influence can be well seen in the challenges and political and historical visas of this country. Therefore, the emphasis of this research is on studying the role of these leaders from the perspective of the participants who were selected with high sensitivity.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. The Concept of Ethnicity

Before discussing theories of ethnicity, it is essential to clarify the meaning of "ethnicity." Some consider it to refer to ancestry, while others understand it as physical characteristics. The familiar context below should help elucidate the meaning of this concept.

The term ethnicity refers to a group distinguished from other social groups by fundamental characteristics such as language, customs, and historical heritage, which possess racial continuity and solidarity. The renowned ethnologist Victor Kozlov states that an ethnic group, or ethnic community, is a formed social organization situated within a defined territory, encompassing people who have historically established economic, cultural, kinship, and other connections with one another (Bayat: 2023, 1). Ethnicity gained prominence during the 1970s, with the growing interest in social diversity and justice, and has since become one of the central questions of contemporary social science. Ethnicity is based on the Greek root 'ethnos', meaning 'blood connection', as distinct from the 'demos', which was a territorial-civil association. Over the centuries, ethnicity changed its meaning, alternatively being associated with tribal, regional, religious, class, and national affiliations. Ethnicity will be defined as group identity, based on common cultural affiliation and a belief in a shared ancestry and a common future. Ethnicity is predominantly linked to specific places, either existing or mythical, as a central pillar of identity construction. Ethnic identities – like all social constructs – are fluid and malleable, tending to rise in social and political importance during periods of conflict, and wane during times of peaceful ethnic coexistence (Yiftachel, 2009: 1).

The concept of ethnicity emerged in the 1960s following the formation of nation-states in former colonial countries, a result of the reduced military power of Western Europe after World War II. However, it was first introduced in 1952 by the French demographer Alfred Sauvy, who contrasted the concepts of ethnicity and nationalism. This socio-political phenomenon has been defined in various ways, encompassing characteristics such as a common name, shared territory and language, communal living spaces, customs, values, and shared sentiments, among others (Bayat, 2023: 24).

This issue has arisen in countries such as Russia, the former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and to some extent, Turkey and Iran, following the end of the Cold War. The issue of ethnicity and its instrumental use by incompatible groups and hegemonic powers, as well as the challenges arising from it, is notable as an anti-security phenomenon (Gökhan, 2002: 1).

On the other hand, ethnicity is objective because it must be based on certain objective characteristics and is constructed by social forces and power relations, largely independent of individuals' desires. Conversely, ethnicity is the result of subjective perceptions based on some objective characteristics such as physical features, assumed ancestry, culture, or national origin. Affiliation or identification with an ethnic group is part of ethnicity. The terms ethnicity and ethnic group are often used interchangeably. While the two terms are closely related, there are subtle distinctions in their definitions. An ethnic group is a social group based on ancestry, culture, or national origin, whereas ethnicity refers to affiliation or identification with an ethnic group (Khairi & Karimi, 2019: 110).

3.2. Theoretical Framework

In this section, an attempt is made to explain the role of ethnic leaders in societies where ethnic values require different ethnic groups to be led by a single person or institution by presenting a theoretical framework composed of existing theories. In this regard, many different theories

can be proposed, but since the strategy of this research is based on the qualitative method, we try to consider the theoretical dynamics in this field and address various theoretical dimensions.

3.3. Instrumentalism

In this perspective, ethnicity is not considered an inherent and natural concept or necessarily a long-term commonality in subjective beliefs, but rather it is regarded as a means or tool used primarily to achieve political and economic goals. With this outlook, the discussion of ethnicity in many countries, especially European ones, can always be explained by the paradigm of instrumentalism. For example, in a country like France, which grapples with issues of ethnic groups, many ethnic groups migrated from various parts of the world, from Africa to Asia, from the early 20th century to the 1980s. Their role was essentially instrumental, to supply labor and compensate for declining fertility rates. These ethnic groups are not inherently French, hence in France, ethnic groups are categorized into non-French and French groups (Bayat: 2023, 3).

Contrary to the constructivist school, the instrumentalist school views ethnicity as a tool or strategic instrument for obtaining resources. Thus, this school has been labeled as "playing the ethnic card." According to this theoretical framework, people become ethnic and maintain their primary ethnicity when it yields significant returns for them. In other words, ethnicity exists and persists because it is useful. According to this theory, the functional benefits of ethnicity include the spiritual and material support provided by ethnic networks and the political gains achieved from ethnic bloc voting (Portes & Bach, 1985: 24). Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan, pioneers of this school, argue that ethnicity is not merely a combination of emotional sentiments but, like class and nationality, is a means of political mobilization to advance group interests; ethnic groups are also interest groups (Glazer and Moynihan, 1975).

The most extreme version of instrumentalism attributes the acquisition and maintenance of ethnic membership or identity solely to the motivation of gaining a relative advantage. For instance, Orlando Patterson stated that the power, scope, durability, and foundations of ethnic identity are determined by individuals' overarching class interests and are used to serve them (Patterson, 1975: 384). Thus, interests are the sole determining factor of ethnic identity, and ethnic affiliation is temporary, subject to the advantages of changing ethnicity.

A more moderate form of instrumentalism combines the benefits of ethnicity with emotional ties. For example, Daniel Bell stated that "ethnicity has become more prominent because it can combine an interest with an emotion" (Bell, 1975: 169).

According to instrumentalism, ethnicity is a tool that people use to achieve their goals because individuals with common characteristics can be effectively organized and mobilized to influence public policies. In other words, people who believe they can gain access to valuable resources or government services by electing an ethnic member to a political office are likely to do so to achieve their objectives. This is because members of an ethnic group feel that they share common goals in life.

Instrumentalists also argue that members of an ethnic group—people who share a common history, language, and customs—feel a strong cohesion with other in-group members. Ethnic activists and political entrepreneurs can mobilize their ethnic groups for commitment (Comaroff and Stem, 39). They can do this by magnifying the differences between their ethnic group and those outside the group and by blaming another ethnic group for their misfortunes. To explain this phenomenon, Horowitz argues that many of the tensions between ethnic groups arise from individuals' assessments of their abilities and positions in life relative to those of individuals with different ethnic ties (Horowitz, 143-144). In other words, if one group of

people believe that individuals from another ethnic group are better off than they are, they may perceive the other group as a threat to their group's identity, which can sometimes be sufficient to incite a group to resort to violence. A similar point is noted in rational choice theory, which aligns with what instrumentalists believe.

3.4. Rational Choices

Rational choice theorists do not believe in the existence of anything called 'ethnic phenomena'. For Hechter (1986, 1995) ethnic relations are not qualitatively different from class, religion, or status relations. Similarly, to class, religion, or status, in his view, ethnicity can be analyzed and explained by reference to the ordinary sociological categories such as social and individual action, rationality, assimilation, group formation, etc. What makes ethnic groups different is only the fact that in this case cultural or physical differences are used by the actors themselves to demarcate individuals and social groups with the single aim of maximizing individual advantages (Malešević, 2004: 98).

Based on this logic, efforts by ethnic and political leaders and elites in various societies to foster unity and cohesion among individuals around ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and other values can be justified in pursuit of various benefits. While there is no guarantee that all members of an ethnic group will benefit equally from the advantages and privileges gained, ethnic values consistently serve as a convenient platform for elites and leaders to pursue different gains from governments. Referring to the monopolization of elites and ethnic and political leaders in this theory is a point that is explained more clearly in the theory of elitism.

3.5. Elitism

Leaders and elites within ethnic communities often capitalize on ethnic values to mobilize support and achieve political objectives. They may promote unity and cohesion among their group members by emphasizing shared cultural heritage, language, and other collective identities. This strategic alignment around ethnic values not only consolidates their political base but also legitimizes their leadership by appealing to the aspirations and loyalties of their constituents.

However, it should be noted that the distribution of benefits within ethnic communities is often unequal, and not all individuals may benefit equally from the advantages gained through ethnic mobilization. Nevertheless, ethnic values remain a potent tool for elites and leaders to justify and consolidate their political influence and access resources from governments. While sharing the central tenets of this position, the contemporary elite theory of ethnicity has developed around two broad approaches: one more symbolist and the other more instrumentalist. The first approach, developed in the works of Abner Cohen and Tuen van Dijk, comes from anthropology and psychology respectively, and is focused on the analysis and interpretation of symbols, and the ideologies and discourses used by political groups and elites to sway mass support as well as to capture the public imagination to generate social action. The second approach, associated with the works of Paul Brass and Ted Gurr, comes from political science and is more concerned with the study of instrumentalist logic as used in strategies and tactics deployed by political elites for the manipulation of the masses. Nevertheless, what is common to both approaches is the view that ethnicity is first and foremost a political phenomenon. In the words of Cole and Wolf (1974: 283), 'ethnicity is politics' (Malešević, 2004: 111).

The fundamental aim of elite theory is that the history of politics is the history of elite domination. Therefore, elite theory contradicts the foundational assumptions of Western liberalism regarding issues such as governance and the proper relationship between the state

and society, as expressed by Kantano Mosca's assertion that the first and superior class always prevails over the second class, which constitutes the majority (Bashirieh, 1995: 50).

Hence, the nature of any society, whether based on consensus or power, dynamic or static, peace-loving or totalitarian, legitimate or illegitimate, is determined by the nature of its elites. Moreover, the goals of any society are determined and manipulated by its elites (March and Olsen, 1984: 360). These discussions partly illustrate the position and relevance of elite theories in the realm of politics.

Ralph Dahrendorf categorized elites into seven types, identifying them as groups performing specific functions: political leaders, economic elites, political leaders and prominent figures, intellectual elites, clergy, leaders of mass communication media, military elites, and judicial elites. Dahrendorf highlighted these functional elites based on their roles in performing specific tasks and wielding power and influence (Bashirieh, 1995: 137). In essence, Dahrendorf's classification of elites according to their functions revisits the traditional method of examining institutions in political science. Van Dijk defines elites broadly as 'groups in society that have special power resources', such as 'property, income, decision control, knowledge, expertise, position, rank, as well as social and ideological resources such as status, prestige, fame, influence, respect, and similar resources ascribed to them by groups, institutions, or society at large'. However, what is decisive for van Dijk is the elite's privileged access to 'systems of sociocultural discourse', i.e., control over symbolic resources (Dijk, 1993: 44).

Analyzing representative texts and the speeches of elites from the world of politics, media, education, academia, and business, van Dijk has been able to identify how elites are able, by using subtle ideological and discursive means, to impose their definition of the ethnic situation. In this way, according to van Dijk, elites have 'manufactured ethnic consent', which has helped to legitimize majority group discrimination over ethnic minorities as well as uphold minority domination in the societies (Malešević, 2004: 117).

Cohen uses the notion of instrumentalization of ethnic symbols in two ways: first as political symbolism of various interest groups that are in a state of competition with each other and with the State, and, second, as symbolism of elite power. What differentiates elites from other informal groups is their privileged positions 'in some important sphere of social life'. On the one hand, they behave in a similar way as other informal collectives in preserving their particular interests, and on the other they must, to remain an elite, legitimize their privileged status by promoting some universalistic goal. In Cohen's words: 'They validate their elite position in terms of an ideology, or a "theory" which is designed to convince the ordinary members of the society, as well as themselves, of the legitimacy of their status' (Cohen, 1974a: 102).

4. Methodology

Grounded theory is one of the qualitative research strategies widely utilized across various fields of social sciences. This approach is employed for studying, elucidating, and developing theories about social processes based on the perspectives of individuals who have experienced social issues or phenomena under study. It is particularly useful when there is limited information available about the phenomenon under study (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss 1987; Birks & Mills 2012). Grounded theory is considered one of the inductive and exploratory methods, rooted in reality, providing explanations for events as they occur. This method allows the researcher to formulate theories and propositions systematically based on real data, rather than relying on pre-existing or established theories (Bazargan, 2014: 80).

In this method, concepts are collected based on data, identified, and extracted, and then extensively compared and analyzed with other concepts. Based on this, similar elements are grouped, and the most abstract group forms a category. Subsequently, concepts and categories are continuously compared with new data until theoretical saturation is reached, and the concepts align with the data (Frost et al. 2010). Traditional qualitative procedures, including data collection, decomposition, analysis, coding, and data note-taking, are all derived from grounded theory (Charmaz, 2017). Indeed, the grounded theory researcher seeks to create a theory in the examination and study of individuals engaged in similar processes or interactions (Strauss & Corbin 2011).

The method employed to identify individuals in this research involved purposive and judgmental sampling. After establishing the necessary framework for conducting interviews and identifying the desired individuals, the data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews consisting of 15 questions, typically lasting between 60 to 100 minutes, conducted between January and May 2024. In this study, theoretical saturation was considered as the endpoint for the sample size and data collection. The sample of this research reached theoretical saturation after interviewing 25 individuals. Considering the theoretical sampling method, the researchers exercised utmost care and sensitivity in selecting the first few interviewees. After inquiries and thorough examination, the first three interviewees were chosen from individuals with a master's degree and from different ethnicities, religions, and genders. Additionally, efforts were made to ensure that these individuals had a reasonable level of political and general knowledge relevant to the main research topic. Therefore, the selected individuals were students from the humanities disciplines. After analyzing these interviews and understanding the concepts that could be extracted, the next participants were chosen accordingly. During the process of conducting and analyzing the interviews, the researchers noticed the accumulation and completion of information from various participants, until it became apparent that from the 19th interview onwards, no substantial new information was being added to the previous findings, and the information was being repeated consistently.

In this study, due to the sensitivity of the social context under investigation and the aim to obtain deep and genuine insights from qualitative research, and to discover a conceptual model of this process based on the participants' perspectives, the grounded theory methodology was used. For selecting participants, theoretical and maximum diversity sampling methods (gender, academic discipline, political orientation) were utilized. Accordingly, students with diverse genders, academic backgrounds, and political orientations were chosen, providing rich and abundant information to create a conceptual model for researchers.

In general, due to limitations such as the lack of access to a large statistical population for conducting quantitative research, the inability to communicate with Afghan citizens residing in Turkey, and the absence of the necessary economic infrastructure for collecting large-scale statistical data in this area, the researchers decided to adopt a purposeful and specific qualitative approach to address the research issue. Grounded theory, with its structured, purposeful, and step-by-step methodology, enables researchers to outline a comprehensive path by relying on data obtained through interviews. This method provides a framework for explaining the reasons and conditions under which the issue under study has occurred.

In this research method, through an iterative process, concepts were gradually extracted from codes, then from concepts, categories were identified, and from categories, a conceptual model was developed. Thus, for data analysis, based on the Strauss and Corbin analysis method, three stages of coding were conducted: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

During the open coding stage of this research, the interview texts were read multiple times, and more than 218 concepts were extracted from meaningful sentences. Concepts were synthesized

into 50 sub-categories and 18 main and more abstract categories in the axial coding. Finally, a final core category of "Obstacles to return to participatory and democratic political culture" was extracted, which comprehensively encapsulates all main categories and provides a narrative analysis of the data.

In the coding phase, the researchers used MAXQDA 2020 software for categorizing the data. Based on the textual and audio data provided by the software, the extracted codes were classified into three stages: initial, secondary, and main categories. Then, using the "retrieved segments" tool in the software, the accuracy of the coding and the categorization of the concepts, according to the definition provided for each, was reviewed and finalized. In this process, the coded concepts were categorized into five groups: causal conditions, contextual conditions, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences, and were prepared for textual analysis with the help of participant quotations.

After analyzing the data, follow-up contacts were made with some participants to present the interview text and analysis for verification to ensure reliability. Additionally, the researcher referred back to the methodological assumptions, the main research questions, and the data throughout the data collection and analysis stages, comparing the construction of categories and paradigmatic models with raw data to ensure the validity of the research findings.

In this study, interviews were conducted with 25 individuals, all of whom were Afghan nationals and born and raised in the country. The participants in this research were selected based on ethnicity, gender, religious diversity, and place of residence. One of the most important criteria for selecting these people was their level of knowledge and familiarity with ethnic leaders and their role in political issues and of course the experience of interacting with them. In this way and based on the rules of the theoretical sampling method, the interviewees were invited to participate in this research. Among them, 10 participants were women and 15 were men. 2 people were Shia, and 23 were Sunni. 10 people were Tajiks, 5 Pashtuns, 3 Uzbeks, 2 Hazaras, 3 Turkmens, 1 Imaq and one Nuristani. Also, 8 people were undergraduate students and 17 were postgraduate students. As mentioned earlier, these individuals were selected and approached with high sensitivity by the researchers, and face-to-face interviews were conducted with them depending on the situational and temporal conditions. In this study, triangulation, respondent validation, and analytical comparisons were employed as strategies to enhance trustworthiness and credibility based on the grounded theory approach by Strauss and Corbin. For validation purposes, triangulation involved the use of coder triangulation, involving researchers and social experts, ensuring agreement among different coders and researchers regarding the research findings. Suggestions and feedback from experts after the presentation of research findings were all directed towards affirming the research findings. In the respondent validation approach, after data analysis, follow-up contacts were made with some of the participants, and the interview transcripts and analyses were presented to them for verification to ensure accurate and comprehensive summaries of the discussions and to highlight participants' emphasized opinions and points in the data analysis. In the third method, analytical comparisons, the researcher consistently referred back to the methodological assumptions, research questions, and data during various stages of data collection and analysis, comparing the constructed categories and paradigm model with raw data to ensure the validity of the research findings obtained.

Table 1.

Personal information of the participants

Code	Age	Gender	Religion	Nation	Place Of Birth	Place Of Residence	Education Degree.	Field
1	36	M	Sunni	Nuristani	Nuristan	Afghanistan	Master	Law
2	33	F	Shia	Hazara	Ghazni	Australia	Master	Archaeology
3	29	F	Sunni	Tajik	Baghlan	Australia	Master	Sociology
4	36	M	Sunni	Pashtun	Nangarhar	Afghanistan	Bachelor's degree	law
5	37	M	Sunni	Pashtun	Koner	Afghanistan	Master	Business and Administration
6	24	F	Sunni	Tajik	Panjshir	Afghanistan	Bachelor's degree	Economy
7	31	M	Sunni	Pashtun	Kabul	Afghanistan	Doctorate	Economy
8	33	M	Sunni	Tajik	Herat	America	Doctorate	Water and Environmental Engineering
9	32	M	Sunni	Tajik	Panjshir	Afghanistan	Bachelor's degree	Sociology
10	29	F	Sunni	Uzbek	Herat	Afghanistan	Master	Civil engineering
11	35	M	Sunni	Tajik	Parwan	Afghanistan	Bachelor's degree	law
12	40	F	Sunni	Tajik	Panjshir	Afghanistan	Bachelor's degree	Medicine
13	29	M	Shia	Hazara	Kunduz	Iran	Master	Computer Science
14	34	M	Sunni	Tajik	Panjshir	America	Master	Law and International Relations
15	50	M	Sunni	Turkmen	Balkh	Turkey	Bachelor's degree	Business and Administration
16	34	F	Sunni	Tajik	Parwan	Australia	Master	Business and Administration, LAW
17	28	M	Sunni	Pashtun	Kabul	Afghanistan	Master	Economy
18	31	F	Sunni	Tajik	Parwan	Iran	Bachelor's degree	Economy
19	31	M	Sunni	Pashtun	Maydan Wardak	America	Master	Accounting
20	33	F	Sunni	Tajik	Badakhshkan	Afghanistan	Bachelor's degree	Archaeology
21	37	M	Sunni	Imaq	Kunduz	Iran	Doctorate	International Relations
22	29	F	Sunni	Uzbek	Jawzjan	Turkey	Master	Agriculture
23	28	M	Sunni	Uzbek	Jawzjan	Turkey	Master	International Relations
24	29	F	Sunni	Turkmen	Kunduz	Turkey	Doctorate	Economy
25	45	M	Sunni	Turkmen	Balkh	Afghanistan	Master	Economy

5. Findings

In this research, the central and core issue that consistently emerges from the data, to which all other main issues are related, is "Ethnic Leaders and Political Transformations in the Republican Period of Afghanistan." This central phenomenon focuses on the role and position of ethnic leaders in Afghanistan's political developments during the Republican period (2001-

2021). The central phenomenon has been constructed around key issues such as "specific historical, economic, and political conditions," "challenges and unstable national and international situations," "the role of media and social institutions," "political justice and the control and strengthening of governmental and civil institutions," and "governmental weakening due to economic and political problems." These elements collectively contribute to understanding the dynamics of "Ethnic Leaders and Political Transformations in the Republican Period of Afghanistan."

5.1. Contextual Conditions: Specific Historical, Economic, and Political Conditions

During the Republic period in Afghanistan (2001-2021), ethnic leaders played pivotal roles shaped by the nation's historical, political, and social contexts. Historically, Afghanistan's diverse ethnic groups, including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks, have distinct identities shaped by centuries of tribal affiliations and rivalries. The political landscape was significantly influenced by the 2001 Bonn Agreement, which aimed to establish an inclusive, multi-ethnic government. This period saw ethnic leaders like Hamid Karzai, Abdullah Abdullah, and Abdul Rashid Dostum emerge as key political figures, leveraging their ethnic bases to gain influence in elections and policy-making. Socially, ethnic leaders acted as intermediaries between their communities and the central government, addressing local grievances and ensuring resource distribution. They played crucial roles in conflict mediation and maintaining social cohesion, particularly in rural areas where state presence was minimal. Their influence extended to providing essential governance and security functions, highlighting their enduring significance.

A) Long Background of Tensions and Collaborations Among Different Ethnicities

- **Participant 11:** "The people's resistance against Britain, Russia, and internal wars until 2021 reflects political behaviors rooted in the perspectives of ethnic leaders throughout history."
- **Participant 25:** "The role of ethnic leaders in shaping developments during the republican period from inception to the collapse of governments is undeniable."

B) Complex Historical Relations Among Ethnicities as Foundations of Current Social and Political Structures

- **Participant 3:** "The Bonn Conference in 2001 was a pivotal stage in Afghanistan's history. Ethnic leaders attempted to establish a political system that guarantees the rights of all ethnic groups."
- **Participant 8:** "Each ethnic group has its leader who has played a prominent role in political developments, sometimes fostering unity and other times contributing to disunity."

C) Widespread Poverty and Economic Inequality

- **Participant 18:** "Ethnic leaders controlled economic institutions, directing international aid and projects towards themselves, leading to economic and social inequality."
- **Participant 17:** "Ethnic leaders often used resources for personal gain instead of investing in Afghanistan, contributing to widespread poverty and inequality."
- **Participant 20:** "Ethnic leaders diverted international aid for personal gains, deceiving the people."

D) Weakness of Government Institutions and Rampant Corruption

- **Participant 5:** "Ethnic leaders played a significant role in monopolizing economic resources, influencing distribution and consumption patterns, leading to plundering of resources."
- **Participant 15:** "Ethnic leaders exploited ethnic and linguistic biases in elections, maintaining power through influence, and coercing people into voting for their preferred candidates."

E) Concentration of Power in the Hands of Ethnic Leaders and the Limited Role of the Central Government in Country Management

- **Participant 2:** "Most high-ranking government officials were ethnic leaders who directly intervened in dismissals and appointments, leading to public distrust."
- **Participant 25:** "The concentration of power in the hands of ethnic leaders prevented Afghanistan from achieving a modern and stable political system, perpetually entangling the nation in war and social inequalities."

5.2. Causal Conditions: National and International Challenges and Chaotic Situation

During the Republic period (2001-2021), Afghanistan faced numerous national and international challenges that contributed to a chaotic situation. Nationally, the country struggled with persistent ethnic tensions and factionalism, which undermined efforts at creating a cohesive government. Corruption was rampant, weakening public trust in governmental institutions and impeding development. The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) faced difficulties in maintaining security against a resurgent Taliban, leading to widespread instability and violence across the country.

Internationally, Afghanistan's geopolitical significance meant that it was a focal point for competing interests. The U.S.-led NATO intervention aimed at eradicating terrorism and establishing democracy faced significant hurdles, including an entrenched insurgency and limited success in building robust state institutions.

The chaotic situation was exacerbated by humanitarian crises, including widespread displacement, poverty, and limited access to healthcare and education. Efforts at peace negotiations were sporadic and often unsuccessful, contributing to a prolonged state of conflict. The withdrawal of international forces in 2021 marked a pivotal point, leading to the rapid collapse of the Afghan government and the Taliban's return to power, underscoring the fragility and volatility of the nation's situation.

A) Role of the United States and Other Foreign Powers in Political and Military Developments

- **Participant 18:** "Afghanistan's policy has been under the influence of NATO countries, especially the United States, in efforts to stabilize and democratize the country."
- **Participant 5:** "The security agreement with the United States failed to achieve political stability and did not align with its primary goals."

B) Impact of Agreements and International Negotiations, such as the Doha Agreement, on the Country's Political Structure

- **Participant 16:** "Agreements with foreign countries temporarily preserved security, but after their end, the government failed to maintain it. The Doha Agreement ultimately facilitated the Taliban's resurgence."
- **Participant 9:** "The agreements with Americans gradually destroyed the foundations of Afghanistan's republic system, leading to the Taliban's rise to power."

C) Influence and Impact of Ethnic Leaders on Domestic and Foreign Policies

- **Participant 19:** "The republic in our country essentially meant an agreement among ethnic leaders to occupy key government positions."
- **Participant 7:** "Cultural proximity with neighboring countries enabled ethnic leaders to establish connections, which they used to pursue personal goals."

D) Use of Power by Ethnic Leaders to Achieve Personal and Group Interests

- **Participant 17:** "Ethnic bias influenced everything in Afghanistan, leading ethnic leaders to appoint individuals from their ethnic group when they came to power."
- **Participant 13:** "In the Doha Agreement, some ethnic leaders sent their sons to negotiate with the Islamic Emirate, indicating the hereditary nature of power."

E) Role of Armed Groups and Insurgents in Weakening the Government and Creating Insecurity

- **Participant 4:** "Ethnic leaders used neighboring countries and armed insurgent groups to destabilize areas under their control."
- **Participant 10:** "Ethnic leaders created discord between the nation and the government, leading to the defeat and destruction of security forces."

F) Support of Some Ethnic and Religious Leaders for These Groups to Weaken the Government and Increase Their Influence

- **Participant 2:** "Political tensions led to the creation and support of armed groups, with some ethnic leaders pursuing ideological goals with foreign cooperation."
- **Participant 6:** "The weakening of the government against armed groups was done with the cooperation of ethnic leaders, as the government was not willing to share power."

5.3. Intervening Conditions: The Role of Media and Social Institutions

During the Republic period (2001-2021), media and social institutions in Afghanistan played crucial roles in shaping public opinion, fostering social change, and providing checks on governmental power. The media landscape, revitalized post-2001 with the establishment of numerous independent television channels, radio stations, and newspapers, became a platform for diverse voices and critical discourse. Journalists and media outlets worked to inform the public, advocate for transparency, and hold leaders accountable, despite operating in a highly volatile and often dangerous environment.

Social institutions, including NGOs, civil society organizations, and community groups, emerged as vital players in Afghanistan's development and democratization processes. These

institutions focused on a wide range of issues such as human rights, education, healthcare, and women's empowerment. They provided essential services, advocated for policy changes, and supported local governance initiatives. For example, women's organizations played a significant role in promoting gender equality and increasing female participation in public life.

Both media and social institutions faced significant challenges, including threats from insurgent groups, government censorship, and limited resources. Despite these obstacles, their contributions were indispensable in fostering a more informed and engaged citizenry, advocating for social justice, and striving to build a more inclusive and democratic Afghan society.

A) Influence of Domestic and Foreign Media on Public Opinion and Political Direction

- **Participant 15:** "Ethnic leaders used media to engage in psychological warfare against opponents and weaken the government, creating a gap between the government and the people."
- **Participant 23:** "Some foreign media also worked to undermine the government, further distancing the people from it."

B) Role of Media in Exposing Corruption and Inefficiency of Leaders

- **Participant 11:** "Freedom of expression, established by the Bonn Conference, made people aware of government corruption and weaknesses, with media becoming a tool for confrontation."
- **Participant 14:** "Media exposed government inefficiencies, but some ethnic leaders used personal media to promote ethnic biases and spread hatred."

C) Influence of Human Rights and Civil Organizations in Promoting Transparency and Social Justice

- **Participant 12:** "Human rights and civil rights were raised by UN member states but were not effectively implemented; actions were mostly for show to gain international approval."
- **Participant 19:** "The presence of America brought significant changes, including access to education and general knowledge, creating an open space for conversation among individuals, media, and civil society."

D) Influence of International Relations and Foreign Support on Domestic Policies

- **Participant 21:** "Lack of coordination among ethnic leaders in international relations led to instability in Afghanistan's foreign policy."
- **Participant 6:** "Corruption and misguided policies of ethnic leaders caused the international community to lose trust in them, contributing to the collapse of the previous regime."
- **Participant 3:** "The previous government was illegitimate, won through electoral fraud, and was managed according to the interests of a particular ethnic group."

5.4. Interaction Strategy: Political Justice and Control, Strengthening Governmental and Civil Institutions

During the Republic period (2001-2021), efforts to achieve political justice and strengthen governmental and civil institutions were central to Afghanistan's strategies for building a stable and democratic state. These strategies aimed to create an inclusive political system, ensure equitable governance, and enhance the capacity of state and civil institutions to effectively serve the Afghan population.

Political justice in Afghanistan focused on ensuring fair representation and power-sharing among the country's diverse ethnic groups. The Bonn Agreement of 2001 laid the groundwork for a broad-based, multi-ethnic government, emphasizing the inclusion of all major ethnic groups in political processes. Efforts were made to establish a legal and institutional framework that promoted the rule of law and protected the rights of all citizens. Mechanisms such as the 2004 Constitution aimed to guarantee civil liberties, ensure judicial independence, and provide checks and balances on executive power. However, challenges like corruption, factionalism, and the persistent influence of warlords often undermined these efforts, making the realization of political justice complex and uneven.

Strengthening governmental and civil institutions was a key strategy to enhance state capacity and public trust. International donors and organizations invested heavily in building the administrative and operational capabilities of Afghan governmental bodies. This included training public officials, improving infrastructure, and developing policies aimed at efficient governance. Efforts were made to decentralize power and improve local governance, aiming to make governmental institutions more responsive to the needs of the people.

Despite significant investments and efforts, these strategies faced numerous obstacles, including security challenges, political instability, and resistance from entrenched power structures. Nonetheless, the focus on political justice and institutional strengthening was vital in the ongoing endeavor to create a more equitable and functional Afghan state.

A) Efforts to Create Political Agreements and Power Sharing Among Different Groups

- **Participant 10:** "In 2001, the Bonn Conference organizers needed ethnic leaders to achieve their goals, as these leaders had significant influence over military developments."
- **Participant 20:** "The Bonn Conference ended Afghanistan's civil wars and united ethnic leaders through Western mediation."

B) Negotiation and Interaction Between Ethnic Leaders, Government, and International Forces

- **Participant 16:** "Since 2007, the Taliban have been in negotiations with the United States, making ethnic leaders' roles in the Doha Agreement symbolic, with the U.S. and Taliban as the main negotiators."
- **Participant 23:** "America's audience was primarily the Taliban and certain ethnic elders, leading to the handover of Afghanistan to the Taliban."

C) Strategies to Combat Corruption and Promote Transparency in Governmental and Non-Governmental Institutions

- **Participant 21:** "Independent commissions to prevent maladministration failed due to ethnic biases, with inappropriate individuals appointed at the top of the administration."
- **Participant 6:** "Ethnic leaders influenced appointments and dismissals in government, often prioritizing collective support and interaction with society over eligibility and competence."

D) Use of Oversight Institutions and Media to Expose Corruption

- **Participant 12:** "Corrupt individuals at the top of the republic system hired others to prevent exposure of their corruption."
- **Participant 22:** "One of the Bonn Conference's goals was to promote freedom, which exposed government inefficiencies, with politicians using media to undermine each other."

E) Educational Programs and Promotion of Political and Social Awareness Among the People

- **Participant 1:** "Ethnic leaders had limited roles in budgeting and educational policy formulation, focusing more on dismissals and appointments. The government lacked clear educational policies."
- **Participant 13:** "Ethnic leaders should have worked on educational policies to ensure the continuity of Afghanistan's political system, but efforts were aligned with the interests of a specific ethnic group."

F) Strengthening the Role of Civil Institutions in Citizen Rights Monitoring and Advocacy

- **Participant 14:** "Ethnic leaders' support for women's rights and civil laws was limited, with most rights dictated by the global community."
- **Participant 7:** "Ethnic leaders can influence society by promoting ideologies against gender discrimination, with Western support playing a significant role in Afghanistan's growth, particularly for women."

6. Results: Weakening of the Government Due to Economic and Political Problems

During the Republic period (2001-2021), the Afghan government faced significant weakening due to persistent economic and political problems, which contributed to its eventual collapse. Afghanistan's economy remained heavily dependent on foreign aid, with limited internal revenue generation. This dependency created a fragile economic foundation, vulnerable to fluctuations in international support. Widespread corruption further exacerbated economic woes, diverting funds meant for development and public services into private pockets. The lack of robust economic infrastructure and employment opportunities fueled poverty and discontent among the population. Additionally, the illicit drug trade, primarily opium production, continued to thrive, undermining legal economic activities and contributing to instability.

Politically, the Afghan government struggled with deep-seated issues of corruption, inefficiency, and lack of legitimacy. Power struggles among political elites and ethnic factions created a fragmented governance structure, making coherent policy implementation difficult.

The influence of warlords and local power brokers often superseded that of the central government, weakening its authority and ability to enforce laws. Moreover, electoral processes were frequently marred by fraud and irregularities, eroding public trust in democratic institutions.

The confluence of these economic and political problems significantly weakened the Afghan government. Economic instability limited its capacity to provide essential services and foster development, while political fragmentation and corruption eroded its legitimacy and effectiveness. The persistent security challenges and eventual loss of international military support exposed the government's vulnerabilities, leading to its eventual downfall. This period highlighted the critical need for sustainable economic development and political reforms to establish a stable and resilient governance structure in Afghanistan.

A) Decrease in Public Trust in the Government and State Institutions

- **Participant 2:** "Post-Bonn Conference elections were rife with fraud and corruption, leading to public distrust in the government. Ethnic leaders, when out of power, often disregarded government orders."
- **Participant 3:** "Ethnic leaders pursued ethnic superiority, influencing dismissals and appointments in government. Employment often required the backing of an ethnic leader."

B) Increase in Corruption and Inefficiency in the Government System

- **Participant 9:** "Government seats were distributed based on ethnic quotas, leading to widespread corruption."
- **Participant 8:** "High-ranking officials' appointments and dismissals were based on political deals and ethnic leaders' consent."

C) Failure to Establish Stability and Sustainable Security in the Country

- **Participant 1:** "Lack of consensus among ethnic leaders over political power led to national instability, with each leader trying to expand their ethnic authority."
- **Participant 18:** "Ethnic leaders formed militias, leading to chaos and lawlessness in various regions."

D) Increase in Poverty and Unemployment Due to Insecurity and Corruption

- **Participant 9:** "The initial economic growth from the U.S. security agreement had negative long-term consequences, leading to insecurity and the rise of terrorist groups like ISIS."
- **Participant 11:** "Ethnic leaders manipulated economic resources and made certain regions insecure to achieve their goals."

E) Lack of Economic Development and Decrease in Quality of Life for the People

- **Participant 4:** "U.S. security agreements worsened security, leading to the rise of terrorist groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda."

- **Participant 5:** "There was no sincere effort to improve Afghanistan's welfare during the republican period. The focus was on weakening the system and embezzling public assets."

These issues collectively contributed to the weakening of the Afghan government, undermining its ability to govern effectively and ultimately leading to its downfall.

6.1. Research Paradigm Approach

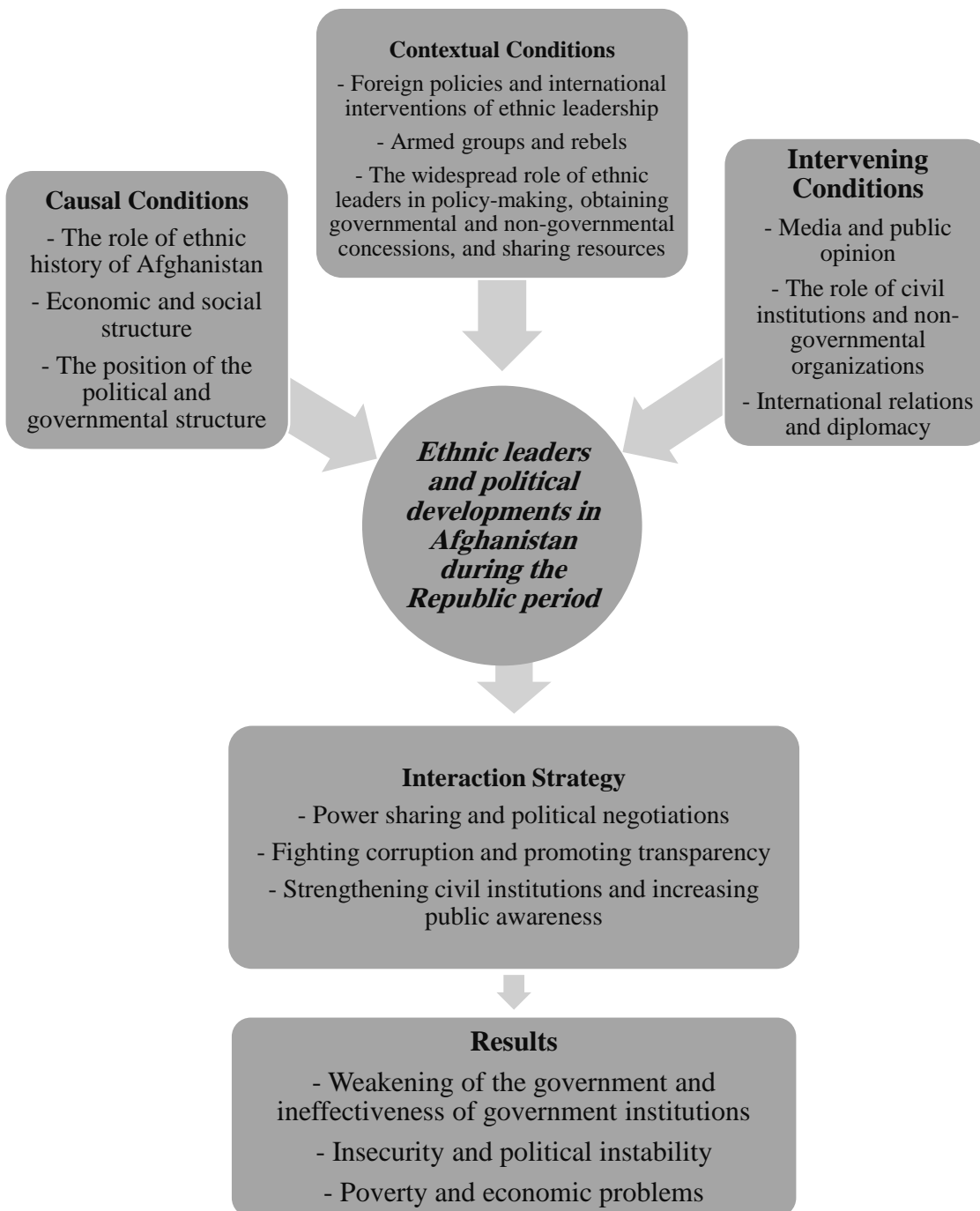


Figure 1. The paradigmatic model with the core category of Ethnic leaders and political developments in Afghanistan during the Republic period

Source: Authors

6.2. Limitations

As previously mentioned, the geographical location of the researchers limited their free access to Afghan citizens. Identifying and establishing communication with those Afghan citizens who met the educational, ethnic, gender, and religious diversity criteria for this study was quite challenging. Therefore, social media was utilized to contact the intended participants, which helped minimize data collection difficulties. Additionally, since exploring the issue of ethnic leaders might have triggered reactions from some participants due to their ethnic and religious affiliations, the researcher consistently maintained a scientific and structured approach throughout the interviews to control the process and keep it on track.

7. Conclusion

The Republic period in Afghanistan (2001-2021) was a complex era marked by significant political, social, and economic transformations, underpinned by progress and persistent challenges. Central to this period were the roles of ethnic leaders who navigated the intricate landscape of Afghan politics, leveraging their influence to shape national developments. Their contributions, while critical, were situated within a broader context of national and international challenges that continually tested the resilience of Afghan institutions.

Ethnic leaders emerged as key political actors, providing leadership, mediating conflicts, and fostering social cohesion within their constituencies. Their ability to balance traditional power structures with modern political demands underscored their enduring significance in Afghanistan's socio-political fabric. However, their influence was often mitigated by national challenges such as corruption, factionalism, and a lack of cohesive governance, which hampered the effectiveness of political justice and control efforts.

The media and social institutions played vital roles in promoting transparency, advocating for social justice, and supporting civil society's engagement in the democratic process. Despite operating under threats and resource constraints, these institutions were crucial in fostering an informed and active citizenry.

Efforts to strengthen governmental and civil institutions aimed at enhancing state capacity and public trust faced significant obstacles. The heavy reliance on foreign aid, coupled with systemic corruption and inefficiency, undermined these efforts. Political fragmentation and the persistent insurgency further weakened the government's control, leading to widespread instability.

Economic challenges compounded these issues, with a fragile economy heavily dependent on international aid and undermined by illicit activities such as the drug trade. The withdrawal of international forces in 2021 revealed the government's vulnerabilities, culminating in its rapid collapse and the Taliban's return to power.

In conclusion, the Republic period in Afghanistan was a testament to the complex interplay of ethnic, political, and economic factors that shaped the nation's trajectory. While significant strides were made in fostering political inclusion and building institutions, the persistent challenges of corruption, economic dependency, and security threats ultimately weakened the government. The period highlighted the critical need for sustainable development, effective governance, and genuine political reform to build a stable and resilient Afghan state. The lessons learned from this era remain pivotal for future efforts in nation-building and conflict resolution in Afghanistan.

7.1. Recommendation

Although Afghanistan's political landscape is currently dominated by a fundamentalist religious regime, rendering political activism seemingly impossible for any of the ethnic groups, ethnic leaders still hold potential influence due to their popular support and political history. Despite their lackluster performance in recent years—highlighted in this research, which offers substantial criticism of their overall role in political, economic, social, and cultural domains—ethnic leaders, given their influence, can still play a crucial role in mobilizing the masses. They can help exert pressure on the current regime and international institutions to moderate the policies of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate. With a deep understanding of the political and social issues in Afghanistan, it becomes clear that the country's strong cultural foundation, rooted in ethnic values, provides significant potential for unity under the banner of ethnic interests. According to John Millar, the Scottish philosopher, suggested, the spirit of freedom relies on the ability of people to coordinate collective action (Albert, 2000). If this remarkable latent potential among Afghanistan's ethnic groups is organized toward collective interests, we could witness significant new developments in the country's history. Analyzing and addressing the obstacles to ethnic convergence, social trust, and the creation of meaningful social capital among Afghanistan's ethnic groups—which has allowed the monopolization of power by political leaders and ethnic elites—can offer valuable insights for researchers interested in studying this area. This could provide a useful perspective for advancing the understanding of the dynamics at play in Afghanistan.

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