

MOBILIZING TRADITIONAL AFGHAN SKILLS AND PERCEPTIONS TO INCREASE RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND SECURITY

Afghanistan's political methods and skills are born out of a perception that almost everyone possesses very limited opportunities and resources, and that perception produces a political culture that one must do whatever it takes to survive. That culture of "amoral familism" ironically offers almost unlimited opportunities for individuals to make a deal about almost anything. So, the question remains: Will the Afghan leaders be able to use their traditional skills to manage the culture of unrestrained deal-making? Can they piece together one factional linkage after another, and create an ever growing political stability and economic growth?

Bob Spencer and Armando Geller*



* Bob Spencer is a freelance social scientist. He has more than 40 years of experience in community development, ranging from Vietnam to high security detention facilities in the U.S. Armando Geller is Research Assistant Professor in the Center for Social Complexity at George Mason University.

During a private interview¹, several Afghan refugee women told about how during the civil war after the Soviets left, they often could not go to school for long periods of time. Four or more warlord factions were continually fighting each other at the same time right in their immediate neighborhood.

They described how the anarchy continued until the Taliban eventually defeated all of the warring factions and began arbitrarily killing anyone that was not a Taliban. In fact, the Taliban walked into the office of one woman's father; shot him and then left. The daughters never knew of any reason except that he was not a Taliban. Eventually, almost every business owner in their city and any living community leader had to flee as refugees. The Pakistan Army then took over the deserted businesses and used those business incomes to support the Taliban while they expanded their control.

These warring factions followed by the Taliban's uninhibited attempts to eliminate any mindset or social structure other than their own caused a severe shock upon the Afghan social structure,² and it caused a mutation and decimation of the social and political leadership.³

Nevertheless, after decades of war and the resulting destruction of social, economic and political structures, Afghans have not lost their traditional skills that resolve conflicts, build community unity and even foster national unity.⁴ Afghan society remains a society that is strongly influenced by traditions. But, we argue that these skills lie dormant.

When Afghans do focus upon their traditional skills, political leaders demonstrate abilities to recruit support; build alliances and coalitions; penetrate remote areas and especially promote stability by adjudicating their rules of social conduct.⁵ Moreover, their skills are not a possession of a privileged few and

¹ Bob Spencer, research interview with extended family of refugees in Charlottesville, Virginia, 2003.

² Armando Geller, *Modeling the Conflict in Afghanistan*, Paper prepared for the International Studies Association Annual Conference, New York.

³ Olivier Roy, *Afghanistan: From Holy War to Civil War*, (The Darwin Press, Princeton, 1995).

⁴ Alfred Janata and Reihanoddin Hassas, Ghairatman – *Der gute Pashtune. Exkurs über die Grundlagen des Pashtunwali* [Ghairatman – The good Pashtun. Excursus on the basics of Pashtunwali], *Afghanistan Journal* Issue 2/3, 1975, pp. 83-97.

⁵ Antonio Giustozzi, *Genesis of a prince: The Rise of Ismail Khan in Western Afghanistan, 1979 - 1992*, Working paper, Crisis States Research Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2006; Alex Their, *Thwarting Afghanistan's Insurgency: A Pragmatic approach to Peace and Reconciliation*, United States Institute of Peace, public panel discussion, Washington, DC 29 July 2008.

powerful. Rural communities, especially in areas of Pashtun tribal influence, possess those skills.⁶

Even though many of Afghanistan's current problems may appear to be extreme, the underlying causes of today's violent factionalism and corruption are the same underlying causes that have existed for centuries; and, over the centuries of experience, communities have learned to manage or control the reasons behind the most serious ills that plague Afghanistan today.

With the destruction of many social and economic structures that have nourished and implemented traditional skills, Afghans have fallen into the same traps that plague many subsistence peasant societies. In closed subsistence peasant communities throughout the world, the members have developed a perception that one person's gain inevitably takes away from all other community members.⁷ Unless community members and leaders intensely focus upon preserving equitable distribution of available goods and opportunities, those communities will decay into conflict with the belief that the most moral thing one can do is protect his family's security without regard to any other person's well-being or their community's well-being.

Without implementing or using their traditional skills, Afghanistan will face years of political instability, factionalism, corruption and conflict between ever shifting alliances. On the other hand, Afghan traditional skills provide them with the capacity to build national integration, increase equitable wealth, and distribute more political power to the non-elites.

Afghan Perceptions Have Established the "Rules of the Game"

By observing Afghan political and social behaviors, we can see a pattern that strongly suggests that Afghans perceive social and economic forces in much the same ways that the anthropologist, George Foster found in Mexico and Edward Banfield found in Southern Italy.⁸ Foster found that the peasants perceived the world as offering very limited opportunities and offering very limited "goods". He called their outlook, "The Image of Limited Good".

⁶ Lynn Carter and Kerry Conner, *A Preliminary Investigation of Contemporary Afghan Councils*, Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief, 1989; Ali Wardak, *Jirga-A Traditional Mechanism of Conflict Resolution in Afghanistan*, University of Glamorgan, UK, 2002, p. 4.

⁷ George M. Foster, "Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good", *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 67, Issue 2, 1965, pp. 293-315.

⁸ Edward C. Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*, (New York, NY, The Free Press, 1958).

He introduces “The Image of Limited Good” by saying “the members of every society share a common cognitive orientation which is, in effect, an un verbalized, implicit expression of their understanding of the “rules of the game” of living imposed upon them by their social, natural, and supernatural universes. A cognitive orientation provides the members of the society it characterizes with basic premises and sets of assumptions normally neither recognized nor questioned which structure and guide behavior in much the same way grammatical rules unrecognized by most people structure and guide their linguistic forms. All normative behavior of the members⁹ of a group is a function of their particular way of looking at their total environment, their unconscious acceptance of the “rules of the game” implicit in their cognitive orientation.”

Later, he explains, “The Image of Limited Good: if ‘Good’ exists in limited amounts which cannot be expanded, and if the system is closed, it follows that an individual or a family can improve a position only at the expense of others. Hence an apparent relative improvement in someone’s position with respect to any ‘Good’ is viewed as a threat to the entire community. Someone is being despoiled, whether he sees it or not. And since there is often uncertainty as to who is losing –obviously it may be ego– any significant improvement is perceived, not as a threat to an individual or a family alone, but as a threat to all individuals and families.”

We do not have to search very far to find repeated suggestions that the “image of limited good” affect human interaction in Afghanistan. When Foster says that an individual or family can make gains only at the expense of others, he is talking about the foundation of why factions tend to compete and tend to exhibit a sense of being threatened by any other faction. In addition, since the “image of limited good” is oriented around the individual or family, it is understandable why factions are chain-link style arrangements that can form complex webs of individuals seeking to protect his own interest (at the expense of everyone else). Individuals are connected with each other to form groups of relationships and these groups are linked to each other via individuals. Thus, reactions by individuals can reverberate through the network causing groups to act. The social equivalent to this in Afghanistan is the “qawm”. “Qawm” are solidarity networks consisting of autonomous actors that provide identity and protection and that can be mobilized to achieve a variety of aims.

⁹ Ibid., p. 294.

Currently, Afghanistan has not yet reorganized itself to the point where they can implement their skill, knowledge and ability. Afghanistan is currently closer to Edward C. Banfield's description of peasant society.

In "The Moral Basis of a Backward Society", Edward C. Banfield provides his concept about "the rules of the game". Without intending to do so, he actually provides a follow-up to George Foster's "image of limited good".

In Chapter 5, Banfield offers 17 specific and brutal predictions about the ways that members in a society of "amoral familists" will behave or perceive others to behave. His analysis coincides with how people in a harsh world of Foster's "image of limited good" would behave. According to Banfield, the "rule of the game" or the definition of "amoral familism" behavior is: "Maximize the material short-run advantage of the nuclear family; and assume that all others will do likewise."¹⁰

For example, "amoral familism" means that the general population more or less takes it for granted that government institutions become the personal fiefdoms of whoever runs them and that those officials' goals are personal enrichment and increased power. They use their government positions to increase their negotiating positions within extensive national and international one-to-one linkages. The complex web of drug trading that includes warlords, the Taliban, Pakistani Army officers and others is a prominent example because drugs provide a large portion of the current Afghan economy.

The Impact of "Image of Limited Good" and "Amoral Familism" upon Village Development

In Afghanistan, if a community wants to increase its wealth, it must also make one of its priorities to acquire political power. At the same time, if a community wants to acquire political power, it needs to make a priority to increase their assets.

In a world of perceived limited good, the predominant method of social organization is a top-down chain-link of pragmatic personal agreements with each individual making the best deal it can. Political patronage networks and political

¹⁰ Banfield (1958), p.83.

parties typically work this way. So, peasants are at a natural disadvantage because they do not bring as much power, skills or much of value compared to the landlords. Thus, they seldom are able to increase their wealth or opportunities when dealing with a more powerful and wealthy patron.

Therefore, donors and other development specialists have learned that one important way that the peasants or any other group at the bottom of the patronage chain-link is that the peasants need to acquire more assets if they are to accumulate more bargaining power. The Ford Foundation, for example, states in its website:

To empower people and strengthen their political voice, we need to help them gain access to the sources of power in any society. Typically, those include assets such as skills that are marketable, economic resources, and social supports. This is essential if we are to make a difference.¹¹

Building more assets can be a tricky undertaking where any success is perceived as threat by all other community members. Foster would have, of course, thought quite a bit about that dilemma. He proposed a strategic approach to answer directly the “rules of the game”. He says, “for the above-reasons, I believe most strongly that the primary task in development is not to attempt to create an achievement at the mother’s knee but to try to change the peasants’ view of his social and economic universe, away from an “image of limited good” toward that of expanding opportunity in an open system, so that he can feel safe in displaying initiative.”¹²

Building assets can enable a community to bargain more effectively with strongmen; or, building more assets can even enable a cluster of community members or most of a community to bypass the strongmen and establish their own linkages with power figures that “own” or manage large institutions or large businesses inside or outside of Afghanistan.

Building individual assets is certainly a step in the right direction, but a vibrant community requires a strong base of economic health that buys and sells from

¹¹ Ford Foundation, *Building Assets to Reduce Poverty and Injustice* http://www.fordfound.org/pdfs/impact/building_assets.pdf

¹² Foster, (1965) p. 16.

each other and possesses enough economic power that can translate into a political force just as feudal lords and, now, warlords are able to do. But, in their process of increasing wealth and power, they would struggle with the challenges of maintaining harmony as much as planning for greater expansion of assets. Across the globe, peasants are likely to express their feelings of tension when they say, “I am so tired!” or “This is so discouraging!” They are really talking about other community members seeing them as a threat and doing everything they can to knock down any initiative.¹³

Despite that social, political and economic culture, more often than not, potential or real competing groups or networks have more reasons to collaborate than to compete or suppress. In reality, the Afghan traditions of alliance building and the ever present reconciliation skills derived from traditional village judicial practices can serve to aggregate otherwise dispersed and factionalized human capital so that they can eventually accumulate enough political power and sources of wealth to protect and advance themselves in a hostile environment.

Each individual’s or cluster’s steps to achieving goals and objectives inevitably overlap with other potentially competing strongmen or factions. Afghans are well acquainted with building alliances to fight outside enemies. They can use those same skills to triumph in the business and political arenas.

Counterinsurgency Implications

Within the context of “the image of limited good” and “amoral familism”, an ideologically driven insurgency often has an advantage because they can infiltrate and recruit within government organizations by making person to person deals and arrangements, but since they have the glue of ideology, they can remain unified while the traditional style of personal networks dominates government institutions. In Afghanistan, the Taliban may face problems of factional divisions, but they do have their core of the faithful.¹⁴ Meanwhile the government attempts to conduct its business with more than 80 competing political parties and continually shifting alliances and sub-alliances among the warlords, drug traders and others; all of whom make personal arrangements with the Taliban.

¹³ Bob Spencer, multiple personal conversations while performing development work in Southeast Asia and freelance interviews with refugees from various countries (1966-2006).

¹⁴ Giustozzi, (2008).

Therefore and importantly, if a strategy of “winning hearts and minds”, or of recruiting local participants to cross the line to government loyalty, then that strategy must take into account the intense competition between top-down patronage factions. If not, then, the complex intertwined nature of shifting and multiple factional alliances will override any effort to control a local community.

The underlying reasons for adopting a “winning hearts and minds” counterinsurgency strategy is the expectation that such an effort will isolate the insurgents and undercut their base of political and economic support. However, “winning hearts and minds” contains the same problems that Michael Semple describes in his recent United States Institute of Peace publication, *Reconciliation in Afghanistan*. He says:

...the current insurgency is not monolithic but rather a loose association of different commander networks that have some overlapping interests but that also have varying degrees of adherence to the leadership of the Taliban movement.¹⁵

He makes the point that these loose alliance networks make it almost impossible to do what he calls a “big bang” peace agreement with the insurgents.¹⁶ In other words, whether the government is trying to defeat “the insurgency” or trying to implement a reconciliation plan. Gaining political support in localities inevitably becomes a process of recruiting and continuously nurturing overlapping interests and then continually building a broader and broader network alliance. Developing these kinds of plans is what keeps political personalities planning and talking until the early morning hours for many days of a year. Then, they repeat the process endlessly to preserve their alliances.

Then, the question remains of how to conduct a process that would use the traditional Afghan skills to maintain equity of gain, and move towards greater total wealth and power. We can call it the “Expansion Approach to Community Change”. We can use the word “expansion” because a facilitator helps community members to use their traditional skills to expand opportunities instead of falling back into a trap of mistrust and conflict about who will prosper and who will lose-out in direct proportion to that new prosperity.

¹⁵ Michael Semple, *Reconciliation in Afghanistan*, (Washington, DC, United States Institute of Peace Press, 2009), p. 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

Even though Afghanistan's politics are a complex web of multiple top-down networks or patronage factions, one incremental first step could be to consolidate community members' interests to bargain effectively with individuals or alliances further up the chain of power and wealth. After that, they can continue to incrementally expand their alliance.

An Outline of the Initial Process Between Community Members and Power Holders

1. Choose an outside mediator with no long-term self-interest in project outcomes. All of the stakeholders need to be able to trust the mediator's objectivity.
 2. The mediator conducts a participatory assessment about perceived opportunities and sources of conflict between the community and those more powerful.
 3. When aid or business resources are available, the mediator conducts conversations or training sessions to help the community and the power holders learn how to set objectives that represent perceived opportunities and priority desires. At this point, the mediator should be careful to keep each side separate; otherwise, the more powerful groups could dominate, and the poor would not likely be free to express their own values and goals.
 4. The next stage enables each side to prioritize their objectives. They need to work out their own internal conflicts of priorities. That could be the mediator's toughest assignment.
 5. Each side will identify what resources and work skills they need to achieve their objectives.
 6. After each side develops their objectives, the mediator delivers each group's objectives to the others.
 7. Once each group reacts to objectives from others, the mediator delivers the reactions back. The mediator helps each group see where their objectives complement or overlap the objectives developed by other side. In the world of politics, both sides will see how they need each other.
 8. Once each side believes that they can develop their interests through the list of common objectives, the mediator then can bring all of the groups together for the first time to further develop the implementation steps including who will do what.
 9. After all sides begin to work on their goals, the mediator could begin to conduct participatory evaluations.
 10. The facilitator will continue to find additional opportunities and additional networks that can join to build more power and wealth.
-

Once the community members and the power holders form an alliance, they can then begin to incrementally recruit other allies that can add resources, assets and power to their abilities to gain more and more wealth and power. Here is a list of traditional skills that can at least start a thought process about how traditional capacities can build a nation.

Skills that can be Used to Manage the “Image of Limited Good”

The traditional Afghan political and social management skills are the very political functions that can produce political stability and broad based economic development. Considering the intense nature of Afghan politics, no one would want to propose a finite list, but a few of the more obvious skills include:

1. Recruitment skills that have been learned by building networks (qawm) for mutual self-interest.¹⁷
2. Adjudication of rules/conflict resolution skills by village elders and others. Instead of the western use of punishment, Afghan communities have a tradition of retribution or restorative justice in order to maintain harmony in the community and tribe.¹⁸
3. Consensus building skills - village councils and loya jirga conventions strive to reach a consensus in order to avoid the perception that any unequal distribution of power or goods takes directly away from all others. Equitable distribution is the underlying goal. Actually, loya jirga means “circle”.¹⁹
4. Interest articulation skills – In order to survive in Afghanistan’s brutal environment, Afghans have become highly skilled and pragmatic deal makers; however, they primarily use those skills on a one-to one scale.
5. Coalition or alliance building skills.²⁰
6. Mediation skills – mediation fits into the traditional Afghan methods of resolving criminal acts as well as disputes.²¹

¹⁷ Armando Geller and Scott Moss, Growing Qawm: “An Evidence-Driven Declarative Model of Afghan Power Structures”, *Centre for Policy Modelling Advances in Complex Systems: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, Volume: 11, Issue: 2 February 2008 pp. 321-335; Fredrik Barth, *Political Leadership Among Swat Pathans*, Oxford Press, New York, NY (2004); David A. Petraeus and James N. Mattis, Counterinsurgency, Headquarters, Department of the Army, (2006); Barnett Rubin, “The Political Economy of War and Peace in Afghanistan”, *The Eurasianet.com*, <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/afghanistan/links/rubin99.shtml>.

¹⁸ Ali Wardak, (2002).

¹⁹ Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System*, Second Edition, (New Haven, Connecticut, 2002 Yale University Press), p. 42; Carter and Conner, p. 10

²⁰ Barth, (2004) pp. 104-126; Giustozzi (2006).

²¹ Barth (2004); Wardak (2003); Jennifer Brick, “The Political Economy of Customary Village Organizations in Rural Afghanistan”, presentation, *Political Economy Colloquium*, Department of Political Science, University of Wisconsin-Madison, (Fall 2008).
