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# Possibility or Impossibility of Centralized Federalism as an Optimal Governance Model for Afghanistan

1. Seyed Mohamad Mahdi. Mortazavi  : Department of Political Science and International Relations, Sha.C, Islamic Azad University, Shahreza, Iran
2. Mohammad Reza. Agharebparast  : Department of Political Science and International Relations, Sha.C, Islamic Azad University, Shahreza, Iran
3. Seyed Mohammad Ali. Shariati  : Department of Islamic Studies, Najaf.C, Islamic Azad University, Najafabad, Iran

\*corresponding author's email: aghareb@iaush.ac.ir

## ABSTRACT

Afghanistan has continuously been subject to conflict among various political actors and groups seeking to gain and consolidate power; to the extent that the modern political history of this country—from its establishment to the present—may be described as a history of prolonged political struggles over power acquisition. The prevalence of political conflicts and internal tensions throughout Afghanistan's history reflects the presence of fundamental challenges in the sphere of governance. In this article, using a descriptive-analytical method, we seek to answer the question of what factors have caused such a high level of conflict and prevented the establishment of relative stability in Afghanistan, and what solutions may be proposed to address this issue. The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan collapsed due to the imitation of Western governance models, a high degree of state centralization, the unjust distribution of power, the marginalization of groups and ethnic communities, the failure to utilize the capacities of local governments, and widespread corruption. Given the mosaic structure of Afghan society and the predominance of ethnic, tribal, and racial affiliations over national sentiments and loyalties, a model of federalism—one that grants relative autonomy to provinces while simultaneously maintaining a strong federal central government—may constitute an appropriate political solution for ending the country's long-standing power struggles.

**Keywords:** *Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, governance, centralization, federalism, centralized federalism*

## Introduction

Afghanistan, due to its territorial fabric, geographical location, ethnic and tribal structures, and the profound role of religion, has always held a special position in regional and geopolitical dynamics for its neighbors, regional powers, and extra-regional actors. It has also continually been subject to conflict among political actors and groups attempting to seize and consolidate power; such that the modern political history of this country—from its establishment to the present—may be described as a history of prolonged political struggles over power. In reality, these conflicts, along with foreign encroachments and the occupation of parts of Afghan territory by outside forces, including the former Soviet Union (1979–1989) and the United States of America (2001–2021), and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, have disrupted the process of state-building and nation-building in this ethnic and tribal mosaic (1, 2).



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The long-term political struggle for power in Afghanistan reached its peak in 2022 with the fall of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the resurgence of the Taliban. Although only a short period has passed since the withdrawal of U.S. forces, the collapse of the central government, and the Taliban's return to power, local, national, and regional implications of these developments are emerging, generating serious concerns regarding the future of this country and the interests of its neighbors and other stakeholders (3, 4). Nevertheless, it must not be forgotten that the collapse of the Afghan state and the Taliban's re-seizure of power was not a sudden phenomenon; rather, it resulted from multiple historical, geographical, and political factors that have persisted from 1923 (the adoption of Afghanistan's first constitution) to 2022 (the establishment of the second Islamic Emirate), and continue to shape the current phase of developments (5).

In fact, the Taliban's return to power has prompted some of the most significant theories and concepts in political studies—such as sovereignty and government—to be reconsidered, and the current situation has placed renewed emphasis on forecasting Afghanistan's political future. Among these debates, centralization and its counterpart, decentralization, occupy a particularly significant position; as Afghanistan is a mosaic and multi-ethnic society, and except in limited historical periods, most central governments have failed in the process of state-nation building. Powerful groups and ethnic communities—including the Taliban—have refused to accept these governments and have consistently challenged their legitimacy and authority (6, 7).

The United States, as a primary party to the conflict in Afghanistan, withdrew after nearly twenty years of extensive presence and now seeks, from a distance, to propose a model for resolving the crisis—one that both protects the interests of its policymakers and remains justifiable before Western public opinion (8). Moreover, the United States aims to portray its departure as honorable and victorious; therefore, any model it proposes for the Afghan conflict must necessarily conform to the principles of Western liberal democracy (9). The second and now dominant party in Afghanistan, the Taliban, after eighteen years of fighting foreign forces, finds itself in the strongest political and military position it has ever held.

Previously, when regional and extra-regional powers were not so deeply invested in Afghanistan and their own interests in this country, discussions of a political solution were relatively rare. On some occasions, U.S. officials even prohibited the use of such terminology in their foreign-policy discourse on Afghanistan. However, political settlement now appears to be a comprehensive pathway for Afghanistan's future. Yet despite this, none of the parties to the conflict nor regional and extra-regional actors—due to various reasons, including the complexity of the Afghan conflict, its mosaic social structure, and the ethnic-tribal-racial landscape—have been able to formulate a clearly defined model for the country's political settlement or propose and implement an operational framework (10, 11).

In this article, the authors seek to examine the governance situation and the trajectory of political developments in contemporary Afghanistan in order to answer the question: *Given current conditions, what governance model is suitable for Afghanistan, and what are the prerequisites for its realization?*

## Research Background

Thomas Barfield, in a 2019 article titled “*What Do Afghans Want?*”, argues that the current centralized system in Afghanistan is one of the main obstacles to lasting peace; because such a system has created the fear among some citizens that the central government—through political bargaining—may grant unlimited authority to local

opponents, who might then suppress them. Barfield opposes the currently established political order and proposes alternative political models (1).

Nazif Shahrani, in a 2018 article titled *“Conflict and Peace in Afghanistan: A Northern, Non-Pashtun Perspective”*, maintains that strategies designed to curb violence in Afghanistan must not ignore the resistance of northern populations to Pashtun domination, their relations with Kabul, and external interventions. To address this challenge, he argues that the centralized system established under the 2004 Constitution must be modified, and political power should be divided between the central government and local governments (5, 6).

Michael Semple, in a 2018 article titled *“Exclusive Settlement in Afghanistan: Ten Priorities for Peaceful Progress”*, argues that crises of participation, constitutional crisis, legitimacy gaps, and the ambiguity regarding who represents which segment of society periodically emerge. He describes this condition as a “breakdown of the social contract.” He examines this breakdown in contemporary Afghanistan and challenges the current political order (12).

Omar Sadr, in a 2018 book titled *“Peace Processes in Afghanistan”*, explains that while the term “reconciliation” had been consistently used since 2002, the phrase “political solution” has become more common in the current context. Following the appointment of Zalmay Khalilzad as the U.S. Special Representative for Afghan Peace, Washington replaced its previous approach and began adopting the term “political solution” to describe its strategy. Sadr argues that the international community is now attempting to redefine and operationalize this term for Afghanistan (7).

Borhan Osman and Anand Gopal, in their 2016 work *“Taliban Views on a Future State”*, write that the fracture lines between the warring sides in Afghanistan represent two different political orders and two opposing ways of life. The modern Afghan republic and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan constitute the external manifestations of these fracture lines. The authors examine both models and conclude that their coexistence is nearly impossible (13).

Larry Goodson, in his 2001 book *“Afghanistan’s Endless War”*, states that a political order grounded in ethnic cleavages and electoral competition produces a situation in which the losing side may lose its entire share of political power. When a political force and its ethnic base lose an election, they risk political extinction or marginalization. He considers this dynamic one of the main reasons for conflict and the continuation of war in Afghanistan (2).

Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart, in their 2009 book *“Fixing Failed States”*, argue that in many countries experiencing civil wars, parties eventually agree on decentralization as a method for ending violence and achieving stability. They examine the Afghan context and present decentralization as an appropriate model for resolving the Afghan conflict, though their proposed mechanisms are not operationally detailed (14).

Leonard Wantchekon, in his 2004 article *“The Paradox of Warlord Democracy”*, argues that a rebel group agrees to participate in elections and accept representative democracy only when its chances of winning are high. Rebel groups that ultimately accept electoral participation tend to rely financially on their own communities rather than external funding. He maintains that the transition from authoritarianism to democracy is akin to shifting to a Madisonian-Lockean-Hamiltonian model of governance, whereas the transition from civil war to democracy aligns more closely with a Hobbesian conception of order. Post-civil-war democracy is, therefore, a minimal democracy primarily employed to ensure political order (15).

A review of the above works and other literature on failed states, American-led state-nation building in Afghanistan, and political settlement in the country clearly indicates that most studies have been authored by Western scholars, and that when reaching conclusions or proposing practical models, these authors often remain

unable to set aside Western liberal-democratic values and view the Afghan conflict through an unfiltered analytical lens (16, 17).

## Methodology

The research method employed in this study is descriptive-analytical. In the descriptive section, relevant data were collected through the review of library and documentary sources, including scholarly articles, official reports of international institutions, legislation, policy papers, and specialized texts. In the analytical section, these data were examined using documentary analysis, whereby documents related to the subject were systematically extracted, categorized, compared, and interpreted.

The research is qualitative in terms of data type and applied in terms of purpose, focusing on conceptual inference and the explanation of theoretical patterns and components. Documentary analysis has enabled the researchers to examine key concepts of governance, analyze the strengths and weaknesses of existing structures, and propose a model suited to Afghanistan's specific conditions.

### Depicting the Governance Situation in Afghanistan and Its Indicators (2001–2021)

The political system of Afghanistan, up until the Taliban offensive in August 2021, was modeled on the centralized presidential system of the United States, excluding any federal system. This arrangement constituted a new political experiment in Afghanistan over the past two decades and, in our view, represents one of its structural weaknesses. The Taliban's return to power in 2021 demonstrated the ineffectiveness of this form of government and governance, an issue that will be examined in this article. During the period of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, despite the existence of numerous ethnic groups, the country chose to maintain a unitary state. According to Article 4 of this regime, national sovereignty belongs to the nation, which exercises it directly or through its representatives (5).

As we saw in Chapter Two, a unitary state is a state that comprises a single central authority and, consequently, implements a unified policy such that the country's population is subject to the same legal system throughout its territory, and regional electoral districts enjoy no political autonomy. Article 137 of the Constitution of Afghanistan provides that "the government, while preserving the principle of centralization, shall, in order to accelerate and improve economic, social, and cultural affairs and to ensure greater participation of the people in the development of the national life, delegate the necessary powers to local administrations in accordance with the provisions of the law" (5).

The advantage of this article lies in its clarity; that is, it establishes that Afghanistan is a state composed of a strong central administration which is at the same time decentralized. Decision-making in relation to policies concerning most fields and issues lies with the central government, the president, and the parliament. It is therefore the central government that dictates the state's main guidelines. The justification for this choice is that, from the legislator's perspective, a unitary yet decentralized state is an appropriate option because it allows many ethnic groups to develop together under a common set of laws and institutions, while preserving their own traditions. This arrangement also enables the principle of equality to be maintained. The disadvantages inherent in the unitary form of the state are mitigated through shared decision-making. From this perspective, it is claimed that decentralization likewise enables the participation of all and reduces the risk of ethnic hegemony.

### *a) Decentralized Administration*

Under the framework of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, a decentralized state was created, in contrast to other existing cases such as federal Iraq after its occupation by the United States. Therefore, before anything else, its organs and the specific powers of its local authorities must be analyzed to better understand its nature. First, it should be noted that decentralization in Afghanistan has been described as territorial decentralization because, unlike regional decentralization, no legislative authority is conferred on local authorities by the constitution. Moreover, the primary objective remains the promotion of participation.

Accordingly, decentralization in Afghanistan operates around three institutions:

1. Provincial councils
2. District (woleswali) councils
3. Municipalities.

All members of these councils are elected through direct voting. The distribution of competences among these institutions is not laid down by the constitution. However, it appears from Articles 139 and 141 of the Constitution that each council administers its territory in accordance with the laws and instructions issued by the central administration. The allocation of powers is subsequently organized among the councils to make decentralization effective and enforceable. For example, Article 139 provides that provincial councils shall ensure the implementation of state decisions in their respective territories (5). Cooperation between provincial councils and the central administration is realized through the obligation of the councils to express their views on important governmental decisions taken in their territories. This cooperation is likewise facilitated through local administrations and the Meshrano Jirga, in which the local councils are represented.

Regarding the competences under their control, it must first be noted that, although the constitution is somewhat ambiguous about the scope of powers granted to the councils, it nevertheless emphasizes, in addition to local administration, their role in accelerating and promoting economic, social, and cultural affairs at the local level (5). Second, each provincial council elects one of its members by majority vote to sit in the Meshrano Jirga, the upper house of the Afghan parliament, with one-third of the members of this chamber coming from these councils (18). The competences of decentralized authorities must always be exercised in conformity with the 2004 Constitution and with mechanisms established by other instruments (laws, decrees, or decisions) issued by the central administration.

Indeed, Article 137 of the Constitution, which is intended to create decentralization, emphasizes the necessary transfer of powers: "The government, while preserving the principle of centralization, shall, in order to accelerate and improve economic, social, and cultural affairs and to ensure greater participation of the people in the development of the national life, delegate the necessary powers to local administrations in accordance with the provisions of the law" (5). However, a transfer carried out by the central administration presupposes the allocation of competences and therefore goes beyond a mere delegation of powers. The hypothesis of simple deconcentration may thus be ruled out. Furthermore, the state itself determines which powers are to be transferred to local officials; the law can therefore supplement and specify the text. Finally, it must be added that decentralization in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan should be regarded as an unfinished project, since the state was still in a reconstruction phase and institutions were not functioning properly. The weakening of the central government and the Taliban offensive undoubtedly delivered the final blow to the decentralization process. Nonetheless, contrary to the view of

some scholars and analysts, the “de-registration” or “de-statization” of Afghanistan by the Taliban cannot be regarded as the principal cause of the weakening of decentralization and the collapse of the central state; rather, Taliban activities and the group’s return to power are themselves the result of the way decentralization was structured, not its cause.

Thus, in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, decision-making generally remained the responsibility of the central administration. Local administration made it possible to implement those laws that met the needs of decentralized institutions and, at the same time, administer their respective territories. However, local administration remained subject to existing laws, thereby ensuring a certain degree of equality among citizens in different provinces. Moreover, local authorities only held those powers that had been transferred to them by the central government, and the principle of specialty applied to those powers; meaning that they could only administer a portion of the national territory within the scope of their delegated competences. On the other hand, promoting participation served the interests of democracy. It is at this point that the issue of horizontal separation of powers arises, which will be analyzed in the following section.

#### *b) The Presidential Regime in Afghanistan*

The separation of powers in Afghanistan is characterized by a strict division that is nonetheless softened by mutual appointment mechanisms. A second feature is that the constitution provides for a powerful president. Accordingly, the regime is based on the institution of the presidency which, alongside elections conducted in favor of a unified state, constitutes a second factor contributing to state cohesion. In fact, the system in place in Afghanistan prior to the Taliban takeover corresponded to the definition of a presidential regime, since “the balance of powers is achieved by their separation, both organically and functionally: executive power is entirely vested in a president elected by the people, who is not politically accountable to a parliament which, in turn, cannot be dissolved by the president” (9). The establishment of a strong executive may pose a risk to the legislature; however, the existence of several institutions and specific instruments helps maintain a balance between constitutional order and democracy.

#### *c) Type and Structure of Local Government*

The governmental structure of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, as established by the country’s constitution, comprised three branches—executive, legislative, and judicial—headed by the president of Afghanistan. The current political situation in Afghanistan is that of leadership by a central presidency (5). Within Afghanistan’s governmental architecture, subnational government refers to local state authorities such as provinces, municipalities, districts, and villages; that is, as noted earlier, 34 provinces, 387 districts (woleswali), 165 municipalities, and approximately 45,538 villages (19).

This type of political system was in fact modeled on the centralized presidential system of the United States. The elimination of a federal system represents a new political experiment in Afghanistan’s history. According to some scholars, in a centralized presidential system, political power is unified and indivisible: it subjects the entire territory to a single political center and concentrates political authority functionally within state institutions (11). After the fall of the Taliban and the establishment of a new political order, Afghanistan found itself in a critical situation. Developments within the country and at regional and international levels intensified. Western powers unanimously supported a strong centralized government led by a powerful president. The creation of the Independent Directorate

of Local Governance (IDLG) and the launch of the Local Governance Policy in 2010 were among the key achievements in the development of local government in the country. In practice, however, local government representatives possessed limited power; only governors enjoyed broad authority and reported directly to the presidency. Likewise, district administrations functioned as subordinate offices of provincial administrations. Control over the main resources and means related to local sectors rested with the ministries. The powers of provincial councils were also limited, and these councils were primarily responsible for overseeing local bodies.

Nonetheless, the “Local Governance Policy 2010” also set out a strategy for defining the local position of representative institutions and for transferring powers from the center to local entities in order to better meet the needs of the population (20). Prior to 2007, the Ministry of Interior in Afghanistan managed issues related to local government. However, pursuant to Presidential Decree No. 1047 of August 2007, the administration of local government was separated from the Ministry of Interior and transformed into a newly established body called the Independent Directorate of Local Governance. This body reported to the president on behalf of all governors and mayors and recommended them for the administration of subnational national organizations.

The objectives of the Independent Directorate of Local Governance included strengthening provincial structures, increasing transparency, creating various opportunities for citizen participation, and ensuring that local agencies actively advanced and enhanced diverse service initiatives for the people of Afghanistan in pursuit of their social and economic welfare. The agency recognized that each province, district, and community is distinct, and that planning processes must take into account local obstacles and opportunities. All staff in local government were employed by the central state and managed through the relevant ministries. The budgets of these ministries covered provincial expenditures. Popular participation was regarded as the key to good governance. Accordingly, the Independent Directorate of Local Governance envisaged practical steps to enhance public participation in decision-making processes, the most important of which was the creation of community councils at all levels of local government, including provincial councils, district councils, and village councils.

Article 137 of the 2004 Constitution establishes a highly centralized governmental system, while at the same time seeking to have village, district, and municipal officials elected by local residents (5). However, this does not necessarily mean that municipal elections are actually held. Although there is consensus that a decentralized system of government is not currently in Afghanistan’s best interest, it is also asserted that Afghanistan presently lacks the budget, capacity, and logistical resources required to establish a fully decentralized governance system.

### **Challenges of Centralized Government in Afghanistan**

The management system that was directly copied from Western countries could not produce positive results in Afghanistan because it was not compatible with the social and economic conditions of the country. This centralized governmental system became a source of problems for local institutions. In Afghanistan, all power was concentrated in the hands of specific circles located at the center. Every decision was made at the center, and local authorities were not granted sufficient powers to make decisions within their own jurisdictions. Officials in the center prioritized certain provinces on the basis of ethnic ties. This led to an unequal distribution of the budget and hindered the implementation of development projects. In addition, corruption turned the civil service into a source of income for some central government employees. As a result, the civil service system—which constitutes the bureaucracy and the foundation of the public administrative apparatus—ceased to function effectively in serving local populations (11).

### *a) Weaknesses in Participation and Commitment*

In Afghanistan, governors are appointed directly by the president and act as representatives of the central government at the local level. Governors introduce district administrators to the Independent Directorate of Local Governance in Kabul, which then appoints lower-level officials. Meanwhile, the appointment of senior officials requires presidential authorization, and the president alone makes the final decision regarding them. The only local governmental institutions that are directly elected by the people are the provincial councils, and the number of their members is proportionate to the population size of the provinces. However, the provincial council is merely an advisory body and has no executive power; it can only provide recommendations to local authorities (19). In practice, local populations are not truly involved in the local government decision-making process and have no meaningful role in bureaucratic procedures. Therefore, there is a significant need for forms of decentralization within Afghanistan's local governance system (11).

Another key challenge is the absence of district and village councils in practice and the inability to utilize them within existing structures, despite their nominal recognition. Due to the lack of meaningful devolution of powers to provinces or lower levels of government, it is not possible to link local planning and community development councils to broader planning and resource-allocation processes. Budget-planning procedures are excessively centralized. Although there is correspondence between local development council programs—transmitted through districts and provinces—and the center, community-level planning projects are still not reflected in central planning and budgeting (11).

### *b) Warlord Bureaucracy and Professional Inefficiency*

Following the Western coalition's invasion of Afghanistan led by the United States, Washington adopted a policy of integrating non-state actors into Afghanistan's governance architecture, particularly within the structure of local government. These non-state actors were none other than warlords who had participated in the jihad against the Soviet Union. Their participation in the Emergency Loya Jirga in 2002 and in the 2005 parliamentary elections undermined the credibility of the bureaucratic process in the country. Their integration into the political process increased their power and influence in local areas. This paved the way for the creation of "islands of power" in the country, which in turn limited the authority and influence of the central government in local regions. For example, in northern Afghanistan, Atta Mohammad Noor, the governor of Balkh, and in eastern Afghanistan, Gul Agha Sherzai, the governor of Nangarhar, enjoyed direct support from coalition forces, which made them sufficiently powerful to challenge the authority of the central government in their respective areas (11).

While the central government retained the legal authority to recruit local personnel, these formal powers were routinely violated in those powerful provinces where strong governors or local leaders were in control. Many senior officials in provinces administered by militias and commanders held their positions through these powerbrokers and thus showed their loyalty to local elites rather than to the national government. For instance, it is said that all regional governors of Herat province obtained their posts as fighters who had served alongside the regional warlord Ismail Khan during the jihad against Soviet forces (20). Warlords' control over provincial appointments often created serious obstacles for skilled and qualified individuals, hindering their access to appropriate positions. This situation resulted in a marked shortage of professional staff at the local level, who then failed to perform their duties in the national interest and instead served the interests of local warlords. The central government of Afghanistan was

unable to implement its policies and projects in local areas without the consent of these warlords. The neglect of this issue by central authorities widened the gap between the state and local communities and ultimately contributed to the overall collapse of the government in favor of the Taliban (15).

*c) A Centralized State and a Selective Circle of Loyalists*

Afghanistan's centralized state, by selecting a narrow circle of loyalists and ignoring other political forces, brought instability and failure at one of the most critical junctures in its history. Ashraf Ghani became increasingly disconnected from voices and opinions beyond his inner circle of trusted confidants, and this situation ultimately contributed to the collapse of Afghanistan's already fragile state. His political and social isolation was a function of his personality and his inclination toward centralization and micromanagement. Consequently, Ghani made decisions without accommodating plural and conflicting viewpoints or contextual information, thereby undermining the effectiveness of state institutions. At the same time, the gap between the president's inner circle and the realities outside the walls of the presidential palace meant that senior Afghan officials were unable to respond effectively to evolving security conditions (3).

Even at the beginning of his first presidential term in 2014, Ashraf Ghani—formerly an official at the World Bank—was favored by many in the international community. However, he adopted a firm and undiplomatic approach in dealing with perceived rivals, planting the seeds of state collapse as early as 2014. Ghani pursued a policy of centralizing power and reinforcing the positions of his political allies, even though his term began with electoral competition and a power-sharing agreement with his rival Abdullah Abdullah. Ghani rejected the notion that Abdullah should be treated as a genuine power-sharing partner. He often sought to exclude Abdullah from meetings with high-ranking officials, including American cabinet secretaries and U.S. officials during visits to Washington in March 2015 (3, 8).

Ghani's governing style was such that he "had more enemies than friends." The 2014 elections marked a turning point in the deterioration of Afghanistan's political stability because Ghani failed to fully implement the power-sharing agreement with Abdullah. Even when he tried to marginalize his political rivals within the National Unity Government, he also attempted to sideline local and regional leaders. Even if this process was part of a broader centralization strategy, Ghani nonetheless tended to alienate even those with whom he needed to cooperate. For this reason, his government was unable to build effective political coalitions. In this regard, his personality traits were undoubtedly influential (3).

As Ghani cultivated political enemies both inside and outside the Afghan state, he also sought to reduce the number of decision-making nodes by narrowing his circle of confidants. Although this inner circle may itself reflect the alienation of potential allies, it appears that the president made this choice in order to consolidate decision-making within his administration. For example, one of Ghani's first initiatives after his election in 2014 was to centralize Afghanistan's procurement system in a newly established National Procurement Authority, through which he personally reviewed construction and procurement contracts of the Afghan government (8). The *Washington Post*, in an article published in September 2016, stated: "One of the constant complaints is that Ghani, through excessively centralized oversight of trivial matters, has crippled ministries and government agencies." According to one analyst, Ghani "centralized control to rapidly implement his own vision of reform, but in doing so he alienated almost everyone around him, including the public" (3).

## Centralized Federal State (Centralized Federalism) as the Proposed Governance Model

Naturally, in a country like Afghanistan—which has been described with expressions such as “mosaic of ethnicities,” “museum of peoples,” “treasury of ethnic groups,” and similar labels—the debate over federalism has existed from the very outset and is directly connected with the question of centralization and decentralization as two proposed models for resolving the country’s long-standing political power struggle (21). Afghanistan ranks thirty-seventh among countries of the world and fourth in Asia (after India, China, and Malaysia) in terms of ethnic diversity, which is noteworthy. Nevertheless, this significant ethnic diversity must be examined in light of the issues and problems that are directly linked to it. Throughout the political history of the country, governments have frequently come to power that did not recognize this diversity, did not respect the rights of minorities and different ethnic groups, engaged in granting privileges to one group at the expense of others, failed to show respect for all religions and sects, undertook the resettlement or forced displacement of ethnic populations, and in some cases attempted to suppress or weaken other languages. In other words, discriminatory policies have existed under various forms of government—whether centralized or decentralized—and rulers have resorted to such policies in different ways. Therefore, the prolonged conflicts over power in Afghanistan’s political history highlight the need to identify appropriate models of governance. Long civil wars for the acquisition of power, largely intertwined with ethnic, racial, and religious issues, and ultimately the dominance of the Taliban as well as the division of the country into north and south, and into Pashtun and non-Pashtun regions, are stark reflections of this bitter reality in the country’s history.

For this reason, alongside the diverse views and opinions on governance and governing methods in Afghanistan, the debate over centralized and decentralized government, along with the related question of federalism, has consistently emerged. In the country’s contemporary history, numerous qualified figures, politicians, and thinkers have spoken about the advantages—and even the necessity—of a federal system for Afghanistan. Among them are figures such as Mohammad Taher Badakhshi, Abdul Ali Mazari, Nematullah Shahrani, Abdul Rashid Dostum (leader of the National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan), as well as coalitions such as the United National Council of Afghanistan and parties like the National Congress Party of Afghanistan led by Abdul Latif Pedram (17). It should not be forgotten that, beyond ethnic–linguistic diversity, the distance between different provinces and the unequal distribution of facilities—stemming from unbalanced economic development across the provinces and class divides in this war-torn and impoverished country—have led these individuals and groups to conclude that a federal system could help resolve these problems and contribute to Afghanistan’s internal stability.

Supporters of federalism regard the centralized state as an engine of tribal favoritism and inequality, and, referring to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan—especially during Ashraf Ghani’s presidency—they consider widespread corruption and inefficiency to be the consequences of such centralization. By contrast, advocates of centralization point to the following problems as reasons for the need for a strong central government capable of addressing them:

1. Fragmentation of Afghanistan’s territory
2. Weakness of state institutions
3. Power of warlords
4. Active presence of insurgent groups
5. Promotion of religious fundamentalism

On the other hand, proponents of a decentralized system, emphasizing the powerful factor of ethnic diversity, argue that in the presence of autonomy, it will be local groups who take charge of managing provinces and regions, and, given their intimate knowledge of local conditions, they will exercise precise control and oversight.

Opponents of a federal system point to the lack of political maturity and low level of social awareness among the Afghan population. They argue that, for a desirable federal political system, citizens must possess sufficient political maturity and accept it mentally and culturally. By contrast, Afghanistan severely suffers from acute illiteracy, prolonged wars, terrorism and suicide attacks, ethnic and tribal prejudices, and foreign interference. In such a context, a federal government would merely fan the flames of division and might even lead to the disintegration of the country. In other words, “turning to federalism means preparing the conditions that will transform the country into a stage for power contests and conflicts” (17).

The question of possible territorial disintegration is extremely important; so much so that some proponents of federalism are accused of separatism and treason. For example, some analysts point to the tendency of certain ethnic–tribal groups toward neighboring states on the basis of religious and cultural commonalities, arguing that such leanings could, in the event of a weakened central state, give rise to secessionist claims. For instance, the inclination of Pashtuns toward Pakistan—which has not ceased its interference in Afghanistan—may pose a serious threat to Afghanistan’s future (16). The presence of warlords may also contribute to such disintegration, as remote areas under their control gradually distance themselves from the national legal–political sphere and collective national consciousness, drifting instead toward ethnic and tribal characteristics. This ethnic rift recalls the failure of political systems in the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Thus, a transition from a unitary, centralized system to a federal, fragmented, and decentralized one may weaken national cohesion, unity, and territorial integrity. Likewise, a federal system may open the door to greater foreign interference and even have destabilizing effects on neighboring countries. This perspective was taken into account during the drafting of Afghanistan’s Constitution, when opponents of a federal system warned against the danger of the country’s partition (5).

Nevertheless, the negative experience of a non-federal centralized government in Afghanistan has revived the debate on federalism. The model proposed in this article—which emphasizes both the need to understand Afghanistan’s diverse characteristics and its long history of political conflict over power—is that of a powerful centralized federal government. Such a government, through the equitable distribution of power and wealth throughout society, could overcome Afghanistan’s political crisis and gradually guide the country toward stability. This proposed form of governance should not be questioned merely because of the negative experience of the previous government and the Taliban’s return to power. The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, particularly during Ashraf Ghani’s presidency, presented a highly undesirable and incompetent model of governance which ultimately created deep rifts between politics and the people, thereby enabling the Taliban to re-emerge and re-establish the Islamic Emirate for a second time. The proposed solution to this problem, which draws on lessons from bitter past experiences, is strong centralization grounded in effective federalism—one that recognizes the rights of all ethnic groups and communities and, by encouraging local management practices, underscores the importance of political pluralism in light of Afghanistan’s mosaic social fabric (3, 17).

In a federal system, power is not accumulated solely at the center. As previously noted, based on the principle of separation of powers, the three branches—executive, legislative, and judicial—engage in both the distribution of power and oversight over its exercise. In practice, some governmental and legal prerogatives may be delegated to local authorities (22). The crucial question now is how to maintain a central government while also recognizing

federalism, since proponents of each of the two systems—centralized and decentralized, or unitary and federal—generally regard reconciliation between them as impossible. However, one form of federalism is centralized—or “integrative”/“unifying”—federalism, in which both plurality and unity are emphasized in order to preserve national sovereignty and counter secessionism. It is therefore preferable first to clarify how centralized federalism differs from other forms of federalism, and why, in this study, its positive features can be highlighted when proposing a governance model for Afghanistan.

There are multiple ways of classifying federal systems. For example, one can distinguish between federal and state-level governments (emphasizing intergovernmental organization and modes of regulating relations), between dual and integrated federal systems, and between competitive and cooperative federal systems (focusing on competition and collaboration) (22). Another typology classifies federal systems based on the degree of centralization and integrative features, dividing them into decentralized and centralized (integrative) federal systems. In this article, we develop the latter typology and distinguish more clearly between these two federal forms.

#### *a) Decentralized Federal System*

In a decentralized federal system, we encounter an undesirable and ineffective political structure that is unable to provide solutions to ethnic, racial, linguistic, and tribal problems, and therefore cannot overcome internal disputes or prevent separatism and independence-seeking tendencies. One reason for this is the granting of maximum freedoms and autonomy to federal units, states, and subordinate regions (23). In other words, different groups and ethnic communities seek to exploit the weakness of the central federal government to expand their autonomy and independence. As a result, with increased feelings of separatist aspiration and the absence of effective oversight mechanisms, secessionist tendencies may emerge, and in some cases, regions under federal units may even move toward disintegration—although decentralization does not necessarily or always lead to territorial breakup. Nonetheless, the very presence of such a potential danger has led some theorists to label this type of federal system as divisive or even secessionist. When ethnic factors become dominant, this model is sometimes referred to as ethnic federalism (17).

Much of the opposition to federalism in Afghanistan stems from the possibility that such a system might take shape in this multi-ethnic country. This concern was even raised during the drafting of the Constitution in 2003–2004 and ultimately contributed to the establishment of a centralized state—one which, unfortunately, through its prolonged inefficiency, once again pushed the country into the hands of the Taliban (5).

#### *b) Centralized Federal System*

In a centralized federal system—also called a “unifying” or “integrative” federal model—while the importance of plurality is acknowledged, national unity is considered the ultimate goal of sovereignty, and therefore unity is prioritized over pluralism in order to prevent separatist tendencies (23). In other words, this system “refers to a form of governing human communities which, while opposing centralization, also resists fragmentation and separatism. In this model of governance, each state possesses its own independent legislative, judicial, and executive authorities as well as its own language, customs, and traditions. In such a political system, several autonomous states, reflecting the country’s diversity, are formed so that they can administer themselves independently, while adhering to the central government only in matters of foreign policy, national currency, and military affairs” (16). The essential elements of this system are autonomy and unity (17).

A centralized and unifying federal system—emphasizing good governance and efficient administrative mechanisms—can be beneficial for states characterized by racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity. By delegating political authority to competent local leaders and ethnic groups, it contributes to national unity and sovereignty under an integrated territorial framework.

### **Advantages of a Centralized Federal System for Afghanistan**

A centralized and integrative federal system—one that is strong and effective—can serve as a governance model for resolving Afghanistan’s long-standing political conflict. Some of the primary advantages of such a federal system for Afghanistan include:

#### *1) Capacity for Experimental Governance*

The existence of multiple provinces, districts, and villages—often isolated from one another—prevented the centralized policies of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan from being properly understood and, as noted earlier, these policies yielded little benefit for marginalized regions. In contrast, the establishment of a system that is both centralized and federal allows for the gradual evaluation of policies and programs across diverse regions (20).

#### *2) Compatibility with Afghanistan’s Ethnic–Tribal Realities*

We observed that the process of state–nation building in Afghanistan has often clashed with ethnic identities and aspirations, and the geopolitical weight of ethnicity cannot be denied (6). The ethnic–tribal structure and mosaic demography of Afghanistan have contributed to this tension. Historically, most governments in the country undermined local sovereignty and failed to encourage meaningful participation in state–nation building. A centralized federal government capable of guaranteeing local governance rights can increase citizens’ compliance with uniform laws and public-interest regulations. When people feel their rights are recognized, they are more likely to aid state–nation building.

#### *3) Enhancing Checks and Balances*

A centralized and integrative federal system, by establishing a structured system of checks and balances, simultaneously recognizes individual and group freedoms while ensuring the concentration of essential sovereign powers (22).

#### *4) Reducing Central Government Burden While Increasing Local Capacity*

Given the complexity of governance in Afghanistan, a strong central government applying centralized federalism can reduce the pressures caused by managing diverse regions while giving provincial governors opportunities to exercise local administrative and civic responsibilities. One major reason for the Taliban’s deep influence in rural areas was the central government’s inability to access remote regions. There were even religious schools in remote areas that the Ministry of Education under Karzai had not been able to register (4). Under a centralized and integrative federal structure, such communities—governed by their elected leaders—could play a constructive role in the country’s future.

### *5) Encouraging Political Participation and Citizenship*

The people of Afghanistan, excluded from politics for decades, could gradually become involved in shaping the country's future under a centralized federal system. As citizens observe that their provinces enjoy legal authority, they become more inclined to participate in elections, driving the country toward deeper democratization, which is itself a function of political participation (24).

### *6) Reducing Group and Ethnic Dissatisfaction Through Fair Power-Sharing*

A centralized federal system, by redefining structures of power and distributing shares equitably, can transform ethnic grievances into satisfaction and reduce conflict over power and resources (16).

### *7) Strengthening National Interest and State–Nation Building*

In Afghanistan, the concept of national interest is weak, which has slowed the process of state–nation building and opened space for powerful movements such as the Taliban. A strong central government that recognizes federalism and supports national unity can facilitate state–nation building through local institutions, political organizations, and political parties. Over time, this leads to the gradual formation of a shared national interest (14).

### *8) Increasing Government Accountability*

The establishment of local organizations and political parties forces provincial units to demand accountability from the central administration. Thus, a centralized and integrative federal government gains political support through provincial councils and other local bodies, enabling minority groups to participate based on available resources and opportunities (19).

### *9) Resolving the Crisis of Legitimacy*

The participation of diverse Afghan ethnic and social groups under a centralized and unifying federal system would resolve the legitimacy crisis that nearly all Afghan governments have faced. Healthy competition among citizens would help Afghanistan—long burdened by “fatigued” or failing governments—to move toward development (10).

## **Conclusion**

The failure of the political regimes governing Afghanistan can be explained from various perspectives, one of the most significant of which is undoubtedly the issue of centralization and decentralization. In reality, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, as the main national-level actor, failed to achieve its long-term objectives for resolving the protracted political conflict over power in the country. The weakness and fragility of the central government in Kabul—particularly its failure to distribute power fairly among all political and ethnic groups on the one hand, and its disregard for Afghanistan's mosaic and multi-ethnic social fabric on the other—led to the weakening of the legitimacy of this centralized state and to the failure of the state–nation building process, which became intertwined with insecurity and instability. Nevertheless, Afghanistan's strong centralized state, structured around a powerful presidency, was unable to resolve the deep and long-standing problem of political power and its violent struggles, and ultimately failed to provide a desirable model of governance. The attempt to establish a Western-style system

of government that was incompatible with the social and cultural structures of Afghan society produced a legitimacy crisis for the central state.

The experience of centralized government during the Islamic Republic was based on a particular interpretation of centralism and rejected federalism, arguing that federalism—under conditions of a unified state—risked generating fragmentation. Thus, transforming a unified Afghan state into a federation was perceived as a revival of ethnic separatist tendencies. Moreover, the specific form of centralism that existed in Afghanistan was not, in practice, truly centralized. Even the establishment of the “Independent Directorate of Local Governance” and the launch of a local governance policy in 2010—considered key achievements in the development of local government—were ultimately unsuccessful. In practice, local government representatives possessed little real power, while provincial governors held extensive authority and were directly accountable to the presidency. Similarly, district administrations functioned merely as offices subordinate to the provincial administration. Control over resources and facilities linked to local governance remained in the hands of ministries. Provincial councils also held limited authority and were primarily responsible for overseeing local administrative bodies.

Therefore, a centralized and unifying federal system may be proposed as a solution to Afghanistan’s long-standing conflict. This model underscores the importance of understanding Afghanistan’s structural characteristics and its history of power struggles, and argues that a strong central federal government—capable of distributing power and resources fairly and equitably across society—is the means to overcoming Afghanistan’s political crisis and achieving stability. Strong centralization based on effective federalism recognizes the rights of all ethnic groups, including minorities, and, by encouraging local administrative practices at the provincial, district, and municipal levels, emphasizes the significance of political pluralism within Afghanistan’s mosaic social structure. According to this model, reconciliation between centralization and decentralization is possible; in other words, it becomes feasible to harmonize a unified government with a federal system.

Based on the above discussions, several general recommendations and policy proposals can be outlined:

1. The need to reassess the highly centralized political structures established during the Bonn Conference and their impact on the Islamic Republic period.
2. Emphasis on inclusive and responsible governance in Afghanistan’s multi-ethnic society to reduce social and political violence.
3. Recognition of minority rights, particularly those of ethnic and political groups, within the framework of political pluralism, and efforts to ensure their participation in governance.
4. Strengthening the Independent Directorate of Local Governance, drawing lessons from the past, particularly through improving provincial structures, enhancing financial transparency, increasing citizen participation, and promoting social and economic welfare through local institutions.
5. Systematically strengthening the legislative and judicial branches in relation to the executive, ensuring their independence from the presidency.
6. Bridging the gap between urban elites and rural communities, and working to integrate villages and rural areas into political participation and structures of power through strengthened local governance.
7. Emphasizing the importance of national unity and national sovereignty while simultaneously recognizing social diversities.

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All authors equally contributed to this study.

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The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

## Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

## Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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