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Original Research

Multi-Ethnic Power Blocs and the Failure of State-Building in Afghanistan, 2001–2021

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The initial efforts toward state-building in Afghanistan began during the reign of King Amanullah (1919–1929) and continued into the republican period (2001–2021). Nevertheless, Afghanistan never developed strong and deep-rooted institutions that are essential for the consolidation of state-building and the organization of the nation-state. The events of September 11, 2001, and the downfall of the first Taliban regime created a new opportunity for completing the state-building process, which also failed, ultimately leading to the Taliban's renewed dominance over Afghanistan. The central question of this study focuses on identifying the reasons for the failure of state-building in Afghanistan during the republican era from 2001 to 2021. The hypothesis proposed in response is that Afghanistan's multi-ethnic power blocs, by concentrating on the distribution of power and positions among their followers and affiliates, while neglecting the requirements and functions of state-building, paved the way for the failure and collapse of state-building in 2021. The method employed in this article is causal-explanatory, and the necessary data and information have been collected through documentary and library research.

Keywords: *Afghanistan, state-building, power blocs, institutions, ethnic groups, corruption.*

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1. Introduction

The failure of the state-building project and the return of the Taliban to power in 2021 necessitate in-depth research to understand the causes and contexts of crisis in Afghanistan, as well as the continuation of instability and political, economic, and social challenges in the country (Hosseini, 2020; Mottaqi, 2023). The fragmented history of state-building in Afghanistan demonstrates that although opportunities for the formation of a modern state occasionally arose, the process of state-building was deeply affected by mental structures, cultural characteristics, and social conditions, and thus encountered fundamental obstacles (Hadian, 2009; Mousavi, 2009).

For the first time in Afghanistan, King Amanullah (1919–1929) undertook extensive efforts for modernization and the creation of a strong central government. He initiated social and economic reforms but faced internal pressure, resistance, and a lack of adequate support. Eventually, in 1929 he was deposed and fled to Italy (Hopkirk, 1990; Kakar, 1986). After him, Mohammad Nader attempted certain social and economic reforms, yet his government offered little space for the

participation of political and social forces. Following Nader's assassination, the monarchy passed to his son Mohammad Zahir Shah (1933–1973). Zahir Shah ruled for four decades, a period during which Afghanistan enjoyed relative security and stability. This era could have been a good opportunity to consolidate the foundations of a strong and stable state, but Zahir Shah was overthrown by Mohammad Daoud's coup in 1973. Daoud transformed the monarchy into a republic. With his downfall, the puzzle of state-building in Afghanistan became even more complicated, as state institutions remained weak and corruption and instability intensified (Vaezi, 2010; Vafaeizadeh, 2014).

The 1978 coup led by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan marked the beginning of a new period. The leftist government sought to implement land reforms, combat illiteracy, and promote political and social participation of women. This model of modernization, influenced by Soviet patterns and based on authoritarian policies, was carried out with violence in Afghanistan. The PDPA government, especially the Khalq faction, aimed to implement reforms rapidly rather than gradually (Ahmadi, 2011; Sinaei & Khatibi, 2024). These reforms were incompatible with the culture, traditions, and values of Afghan society. As a result, they faced strong public resistance, which led to the victory of the Mujahideen. However, as soon as the Mujahideen entered Kabul, they turned on each other over the division of power. This period of civil war between jihadist groups lasted five years, out of which the Taliban emerged in 1996 (Rashid, 1999; Tanin, 2005).

The Taliban sought to establish an Islamic government, but their regime collapsed after the September 11, 2001 attacks due to U.S. and NATO intervention on October 7, 2001, paving the way for the establishment of the "Islamic Republic of Afghanistan" through the Bonn Conference with the support of the United States and the international community (Burnell & Randall, 2013; Dobbins, 2012).

This time, the state-building process was inspired by democratic and liberal doctrines. Drafting a new constitution, holding presidential, parliamentary, and provincial council elections, creating a parliament, and expanding free media and civil society were manifestations of this new approach (Fukuyama, 2004, 2017). Nevertheless, efforts toward state-building during the twenty years of the republic also ended in failure (Osmani, 2019; Sharan, 2016). Under Hamid Karzai's thirteen-year presidency, war, conflict, and widespread corruption persisted. The political structure of Afghanistan, instead of focusing on public interests and consolidating the political system, was shaped by power struggles among different groups. After thirteen years of rule, Karzai handed power to Ashraf Ghani.

Ghani, who had formed a narrow circle of close allies under the label of the "three-person republic," attempted to manage politics, the economy, and security himself (Najafizadeh, 2016; Tolo News, 2016). The unrestrained rivalries driven by power blocs fueled political and social tensions and popular dissatisfaction, ultimately leading to instability and the increased influence of the Taliban. Exploiting the situation, the Taliban grew bolder in their efforts to overthrow the new system. Finally, on August 15, 2021, Ghani surrendered the twenty-year republic to the Taliban, closing the chapter of state-building in Afghanistan once again (Adeli, 2020; BBC, 2020).

Scholars have offered different explanations for the failure of state-building in Afghanistan during this period, emphasizing factors such as historical-social dynamics, the ethnic composition of Afghan society, foreign intervention, and political instability (Huntington, 1997; MigdAl, 1988). Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic country where the process of national integration has not been realized. However, it seems that both theoretically and practically, this situation has led to neglect of the fundamental factor that played a decisive role in the collapse of the state-building process: the formation of multi-ethnic elite coalitions. These blocs, which aimed at gaining and preserving power through the division of positions and spoils, played a major role in the failure of state-building between 2001 and 2021 (Farzanepour, 2017; Jahangir, 2014).

Accordingly, it is argued that the multi-ethnic power blocs in Afghanistan, instead of distributing power fairly, engaged in concentration and monopolization of power, dividing state positions among their followers and affiliates, while disregarding the requirements of state-building, institution-building, and meritocracy. This dynamic weakened the state-building process and ultimately led to its collapse during the republican era (Atraffi, 2015; Osmani, 2019).

The method of this study is causal-explanatory, and the necessary data and information have been collected through documentary and library research.

2. Research Background

The available literature on state-building and its failure in Afghanistan can be divided into two categories.

The first category includes sources written before the republican period (2001–2002), which addressed state-building and the factors behind its failure in Afghanistan. Hopkirk (1990), in his book *The Great Game: On Struggle for Empire in Central Asia*, examined the history and role of the policies of great powers in Central Asia, especially Afghanistan (Hopkirk, 1990). Similarly, Kakar (1986), in *The Two Periods of the Anglo-Afghan War*, analyzed state-building in Afghanistan under the influence of the Cold War and the rivalry between the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union (Kakar, 1986). Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid (1999), in his work *Pakistan and the Taliban: Afghanistan and Global Politics*, discussed the emergence of the Taliban and its impact on Afghanistan's political structure and the challenges of state-building (Rashid, 1999). Rashid further emphasized in his work that Afghanistan's dependence on international aid—both financial and technical—from foreign countries and international organizations undermined the independence of Afghan state institutions (Rashid, 1999).

The second category consists of works that examined state-building during the twenty years of the republic (2001–2021). Sharan (2016), in his book *The Network State: The Relationship Between Power and Wealth in Afghanistan After 2001*, described the post-Bonn government as a "network state," the survival of which depended on the stability of powerful networks (Sharan, 2016). James Dobbins (2012), in *Nation-Building in Afghanistan After the Taliban*, examined the formation of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan following the fall of the first Taliban regime (Dobbins, 2012). According to him, the foundation of the state- and nation-building process in Afghanistan was laid in Washington's war rooms, where policymakers such as Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice, Donald Rumsfeld, and Zalmay Khalilzad had conflicting visions.

Vaezi (2010), in *Disturbed Identities: A Reflection on Concepts and Foundations of State-Building in Afghanistan*, focused on issues of national identity and nation-building in Afghanistan (Vaezi, 2010). He argued that external interference, economic factors, the tribal structure of society, multiple linguistic identities, religious sectarianism, incomplete political systems, and feudal fragmentation were among the factors preventing the formation of a national state in Afghanistan. Tamanna (2008), in *U.S. Foreign Policy in Afghanistan: The Greater Middle East Project, Nation-State Building, and the Fight Against Terrorism*, reviewed U.S. policy toward Afghan state- and nation-building (Tamanna & Sariolghalam, 2008). He defined state- and nation-building as the creation of political-security, economic, and social infrastructure, and noted that the U.S. attempted to replicate its experiences from Germany, Japan, and the Balkans in Afghanistan.

Jahangir (2014), in *The State in Afghanistan in a Structural Realist Approach*, argued that American security theorists considered terrorism to be a reflection of "failed states" and environments of persistent disorder (Jahangir, 2014). Likewise, Hosseini (2020), in *The End of Electoral Disputes, Not Politics*, emphasized that the process of state-building in developing countries often fails, as these countries face crises of identity, legitimacy, nation-building, and ethnic and sectarian violence (Hosseini, 2020). Farzanepour (2017), in *Historical Application of Elite Theory and a Pathology of the Role of Agents on the Fragility of Afghan States*, highlighted instability as the main cause of elite failure and state collapse in Afghanistan (Farzanepour, 2017).

Hadian (2009), in *Structural Weakness of Nation-State Building in Afghanistan*, identified ethnic geography as one of the independent variables intensifying the structural weakness of state- and nation-building (Hadian, 2009). Similarly, Vafaeizadeh (2014), in *Ethnic Politics and Peace-Building in Afghanistan: The Foundations of Political Conflict and the Difficulties of Democratic Transition*, analyzed inter-ethnic relations, the politicization of ethnicity, and its consequences for political development, state-building, nation-building, peace consolidation, and democracy (Vafaeizadeh, 2014). He argued that the Bonn Agreement (2001) provided a new and significant opportunity for building a political structure, but instead led to "ethnic divisions of power."

In the present study, the multi-ethnic structure of Afghanistan and the existence of ethnic rivalries—particularly in recent decades—are not denied. However, the emphasis is on the fact that some ethnic elites in Afghanistan, by exploiting ethnic structures, sought to represent their groups in the power structure.

By monopolizing power and wealth for their own continuity, they violated the requirements of the state-building process and thus contributed to the weakening and eventual collapse of the Afghan republic (Atraffi, 2015; Osmani, 2019).

3. Theoretical Framework

Theories of state-building can be classified into four categories.

The first approach emphasizes the role of war in the emergence of early modern states. Scholars such as Otto Hintze, Charles Tilly, Brian Downing, Thomas Ertman, Michael Mann, and Anthony Giddens all highlighted the role of war in state formation.

The second approach focuses on economic and social factors. Perry Anderson saw the absolute state as the result of social and economic crises of the feudal system, Bertrand Badie and Boem considered it a product of systemic transitions, and Immanuel Wallerstein attributed it to the shift from feudal to capitalist modes of production.

The third theoretical approach can be examined in cultural analyses. Grossi and Figgis emphasized the role of religious doctrines in state-building, particularly the influence of Protestant Reformation and Martin Luther's teachings on the formation of absolute states.

The fourth approach, which emerged in the 1980s, concerns state-building in the Third World. Samuel Huntington and Joel Migdal carried out important studies in this field (Huntington, 1997; MigdAl, 1988). The main focus of these theorists has been on the obstacles to state-building in developing countries.

The theoretical framework of the present study is based on the state-building approach and the assumptions of prominent theorists of state-building in the Third World. Most of these theorists emphasize institution-building as the core of the state-building process. Francis Fukuyama defines state-building as the creation of new governmental institutions and the strengthening of existing ones (Fukuyama, 2004). Eriksen views the state as a set of institutions independent of society, possessing authority within society and the capacity to regulate and administer it to achieve security and development (Eriksen & sundstol, 2017).

Samuel Huntington argued that political institutions are established around the primacy of public interest and, apart from their structural dimension, have a moral dimension as well. Societies with weak political institutions lack the ability to curb selfish and narrow-minded ambitions (Huntington, 1997). He maintained that state-building in the Third World lacks institutionalization: while social forces are strong, political institutions are weak, leaving legislatures, executives, and political parties fragile and disorganized. In such cases, state development lags behind social development (Huntington, 1997).

Migdal, in his seminal work *Strong Societies and Weak States*, examined state–society relations and state capacities in the Third World (MigdAl, 1988). He argued that Third World states are often weak and inefficient because they lack the capacity and authority to impose and enforce binding rules across society. They also fail to regulate social organizations and to use legitimate coercion when necessary. According to Migdal, society in these countries is network-based, which makes it difficult for state leaders to impose state control. States compete with powerful social organizations such as tribal leaders, military officers, landlords, wealthy peasants, and employers, which they cannot effectively control. As a result, such states rely on "politics of survival," employing strategies such as frequent reshuffling of officials, creating redundant and inefficient institutions, squandering financial resources, and politicizing the bureaucracy.

Burnell and Randall (2013), in their studies on developing countries, pointed out that corruption is another major obstacle to state-building. They argued that instead of developmental states, what often emerges are predatory states dominated by corrupt elites. In such contexts, the state acts less as a provider of law, order, security, justice, and welfare, and more as a mechanism for a small elite to accumulate wealth and privileges (Burnell & Randall, 2013).

Ethnic conflict and mentality constitute another barrier to state-building in developing countries. Smith (2005) considered ethnic conflict as a reflection of elite competition for political power, economic benefits, and social position (Smith, 2005). Robert Gurr emphasized that in multi-ethnic societies, relative deprivation and rival ethnic outlooks create conflict, which profoundly affects relations between ethnic groups and the state, and can generate discontent, rebellion, and protest (Gurr, 2000).

4. Multi-Ethnic Power Blocs in Afghanistan

The term "multi-ethnic power blocs" refers to coalitions of influential ethnic elites who held the levers of power during the republican period (2001–2021). Afghanistan is a multi-ethnic country, although the exact population distribution of these ethnic groups remains uncertain. The Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek are the four largest ethnic groups, together constituting approximately 95 percent of the Afghan population. Despite competing with one another, elites from these groups often formed coalitions during crucial political junctures, especially presidential elections. These multi-ethnic blocs sought to monopolize power, dominate state institutions, and then distribute positions and privileges based on their share within the bloc. These blocs during the republican period can be studied and analyzed in six distinct phases (Najafizadeh, 2016; Osmani, 2019).

5. Ethnic Power Bloc in the Interim Government (2001–2002)

After the U.S. attack on Afghanistan and the fall of the first Taliban government, under the leadership of the United Nations, Taliban opponents gathered in Bonn, Germany, to negotiate the formation of a new Afghan government. After eight days of negotiation, they reached an agreement and signed the Bonn Agreement. The Bonn Agreement established a four-month interim government headed by Hamid Karzai, with key positions allocated to the Mujahideen. Subsequently, an Emergency Loya Jirga was to be convened to determine the head of the cabinet of the two-year transitional government (Mousavi, 2009).

The interim government was administered by a coalition of Afghan ethnic elites, which can be considered the first multi-ethnic power bloc in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban. The composition of this government was heterogeneous, bringing together figures with divergent political orientations and ideological beliefs. This coalition is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Composition of the Interim Government of Afghanistan

Position	Name	Ethnicity	Affiliation
President	Hamid Karzai	Pashtun	–
Vice President & Minister of Defense	Mohammad Qasim Fahim	Tajik	United Front
Vice President & Minister of Women's Affairs	Sima Samar	Hazara	Women's Rights Activist
Vice President & Minister of Planning	Mohammad Mohaqiq	Hazara	Islamic Unity Party
Vice President & Minister of Energy	Mohammad Shaker Kargar	Uzbek	United Front
Vice President & Minister of Finance	Hedayat Amin Arsala	Pashtun	Relative of Zahir Shah
Minister of Foreign Affairs	Abdullah Abdullah	Pashtun	United Front
Minister of Interior	Yunus Qanuni	Tajik	United Front
Minister of Communications	Abdul Rahim	Tajik	United Front
Minister of Borders & Ethnic Groups	Amanullah Zadran	Pashtun	–
Minister of Refugees	Enayatullah Nazari	Tajik	United Front
Minister of Health	Suhaila Siddiq	Pashtun	Independent
Minister of Commerce & Industry	Sayed Mustafa Kazemi	Sayyid	United Front
Minister of Agriculture	Sayed Hussain Anwari	Sayyid	United Front
Minister of Justice	Abdul Rahim Karimi	Uzbek	–
Minister of Information & Culture	Sayed Makhdoom Raheen	Tajik	Rome Group
Minister of Reconstruction	Mohammad Amin Farhang	Tajik	Rome Group
Minister of Hajj & Islamic Guidance	Mohammad Hanif Balkhi	Tajik	Independent
Minister of Urban Affairs	Abdul Qadeer	Pashtun	Military Commander
Minister of Public Works	Abdul Khaliq Fazal	Pashtun	Rome Group
Minister of Martyrs & Disabled	Abdullah Wardak	Pashtun	Jihadi Commander
Minister of Higher Education	Sharif Fayez	Tajik	–
Minister of Aviation	Abdul Rahman Nuristani	Tajik	Rome Group
Minister of Labor & Social Affairs	Mirwais Sadeq	Tajik	Son of Ismail Khan
Minister of Transportation	Sultan Hamid Sultan	Hazara	–
Minister of Education	Rasool Amin	Pashtun	Rome Group
Minister of Rural Development	Abdul Malik Anwar	Tajik	–

As shown in Table 1, the first power bloc was shaped with a relatively balanced yet superior composition of Pashtun and Tajik elites (Johnson. Thomas, 2006).

6. Ethnic Power Bloc in the Transitional Government (2002–2004)

At the end of the interim government, in accordance with the Bonn Agreement, the Emergency Loya Jirga was held in Kabul. The participants elected Hamid Karzai as the head of the Transitional Government of Afghanistan. According to the Bonn Agreement, the transitional government was tasked with convening the Constitutional Loya Jirga, which later approved the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (Mortazavi & Ghiam, 2011).

The transitional government lasted two years, after which the first presidential election was held and Hamid Karzai's first administration was established. Like its predecessor, the transitional government was administered by a multi-ethnic bloc of power under the leadership of Hamid Karzai. Political elites from different ethnic groups, who had once been adversaries and whose ideological orientations and interests often diverged, now coalesced around Karzai. However, in comparison with the interim government, Tajik representation in the transitional cabinet declined, while Pashtun presence increased (Osmani, 2019).

7. Multi-Ethnic Power Bloc in the First Presidency of Hamid Karzai (2004–2009)

On October 9, 2004, Afghanistan held its first presidential election, with eighteen candidates competing. Hamid Karzai won with 55.4% of the vote and was elected as president. The first cabinet of Karzai's administration consisted of 26 ministers. Like the interim and transitional governments, the cabinet included individuals and politicians from diverse orientations—some jihadi leaders as well as Afghan technocrats educated in the West.

Table 2

Composition of the First Government of Hamid Karzai (2004–2009)

Position	Name(s)	Ethnicity
President	Hamid Karzai	Pashtun
First Vice President	Ahmad Zia Massoud	Tajik
Second Vice President	Karim Khalili	Hazara
Senior Advisor	Hedayat Amin Arsala	Pashtun
Minister of Defense	Abdul Rahim Wardak	Pashtun
Minister of Foreign Affairs	Abdullah Abdullah / Dadfar Spanta	Pashtun / Tajik
Minister of Education	Hanif Atmar / Farooq Wardak	Pashtun / Pashtun
Minister of Culture	Makhdoom Raheen / Karim Khurram	Tajik / Pashtun
Minister of Finance	Anwar ul-Haq Ahadi / Omar Zakhilwal	Pashtun / Pashtun
Minister of Interior	Ali Ahmad Jalali / Zarar Moqbel	Pashtun / Tajik
Minister of Economy	Amin Farhang / Jalil Shams	Pashtun / Tajik
Minister of Telecommunications	Amirzai Sangin	Pashtun
Minister of Borders & Tribes	Azam Dadfar / Karim Brahui	Uzbek / Baloch
Minister of Refugees	Sher Mohammad Akhundzada	–
Minister of Mines	Mohammad Siddiq / Ebrahim Adel	Pashtun / Pashtun
Minister of Women's Affairs	Massouda Jalal / Hosn Bano Ghazanfar	Tajik / Uzbek
Minister of Health	Mohammad Amin Fatemi	Tajik
Minister of Commerce	Farhang, Haidar Raza, Shahrani	Pashtun, Tajik / Uzbek
Minister of Agriculture	Obaidullah Ramin / Asif Rahimi	Tajik / Pashtun
Minister of Justice	Sarwar Danish	Hazara
Minister of Public Works	Sohrab Ali Safari	Hazara
Minister of Reconstruction	Mohammad Amin Farhang	Pashtun
Minister of Hajj & Religious Affairs	Mohammad Amin Naziryar	Pashtun
Minister of Urban Development	Yousuf Pashtun	Pashtun
Minister of Water & Energy	Mohammad Ismail Khan	Tajik
Minister of Counter-Narcotics	Habibullah Qaderi / Gen. Khodadad	Pashtun / Hazara
Minister of Higher Education	Amir Shah Hassanyar / Azam Dadfar	Hazara / Pashtun
Minister of Transport & Aviation	Hamidullah Qaderi / Omar Zakhilwal	Pashtun / Pashtun
Minister of Labor & Social Affairs	Ikram Massoumi / Balkhi / Qorqeen	Tajik / Sayyid / Turkmen
Minister of Rural Development	Mohammad Hanif Atmar	Pashtun
Attorney General	Ishaq Aloko	Pashtun
National Security Advisor	Zalmai Rassoul	Pashtun

The removal of Qasim Fahim from the cabinet provoked his strong dissatisfaction. Fahim accused Karzai of "conspiracy" against the jihadi groups and claimed that Karzai was attempting to eliminate the Mujahideen from Afghan politics. For about a year, General Fahim remained inactive until he was appointed as a member of the Senate through the National Assembly. Shortly afterward, Karzai selected him as his senior security advisor (Anvari, 2006). Fahim maintained his own faction in the Senate, with loyal senators who secured administrative positions under his influence. Moreover, several governors and military commanders across the country remained loyal to him and acted in his interests. Yunus Qanuni, another prominent jihadi figure, was not included in Karzai's first cabinet. Instead, he entered the House of Representatives and served as its speaker for five years, leading his own parliamentary faction. Abdullah Abdullah, another prominent figure, remained in Karzai's cabinet for two years before being dismissed. Thereafter, he played the role of opposition leader until the end of Karzai's second term, maintaining his own independent power bloc (Adel, 2009).

8. Multi-Ethnic Power Blocs in the Second Presidency of Hamid Karzai (2009–2014)

On August 20, 2009, Afghanistan held its second presidential election. Although Hamid Karzai initially secured around 55 percent of the votes, following two months of investigation into fraud allegations and the invalidation of some ballots, his votes fell below the 50 percent threshold. According to electoral law, the election was to proceed to a second round between the top two candidates. However, Abdullah Abdullah, Karzai's main rival, withdrew from the run-off in protest against the electoral commission and the lack of transparency. As a result, Karzai was declared president for a second term (Adel, 2009).

During this period, three main power groups dominated Afghan politics. The first was led by Hamid Karzai, who controlled the executive branch. In Karzai's cabinet, Mohammad Qasim Fahim served as first vice president and Mohammad Karim Khalili as second vice president. Several ministers were appointed by Fahim, others by Khalili, while some remained loyal to Karzai. The second and third power groups controlled the House of Representatives. Although Yunus Qanuni had been removed as speaker, he still retained a significant parliamentary bloc that opposed the government. In contrast, Abdul Rab Rasul Sayyaf led another bloc in parliament, supported by Karzai and government institutions. Overall, relations between the executive and legislative branches were tense, while the judiciary was largely under executive influence. Beyond these main power groups, influential jihadi figures such as Atta Mohammad Noor, Abdul Rashid Dostum, and Mohammad Mohaqiq wielded considerable influence both in Kabul and in the provinces (Najafizadeh, 2016; Osmani, 2019).

9. Multi-Ethnic Power Blocs in the First Presidency of Ashraf Ghani (2014–2019)

Afghanistan's third presidential election took place in two rounds in 2014. In the first round, no candidate obtained the required majority. The run-off election was held between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah. The Afghan Election Commission declared Ghani the winner, but Abdullah refused to accept the results. With the mediation of Hamid Karzai and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, the two rivals agreed to form a National Unity Government. Based on this agreement, Ashraf Ghani became president and Abdullah Abdullah assumed the newly created position of chief executive, while key positions were divided equally between them (Rosenborg & Soukhanyar, 2014).

In this period, two main power groups held control over the executive branch: Ashraf Ghani's camp and Abdullah Abdullah's camp. Each leader distributed government positions among their supporters and those who had backed them during the election. Moreover, each camp itself consisted of smaller power groups. Out of 25 ministries, 13 were allocated to Ghani and 12 to Abdullah, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Cabinet of the National Unity Government

Position	Name	Power Group
Minister of Defense	Tareq Shah Bahrami	Ghani
Minister of Interior	Noor ul-Haq Ulumi	Abdullah
Head of National Security	Rahmatullah Nabil	Ghani
Minister of Foreign Affairs	Salahuddin Rabbani	Abdullah
Minister of Finance	Eklil Hakimi	Ghani
Minister of Economy	Sattar Murad	Abdullah
Minister of Commerce	Homayoun Rasa	Abdullah
Minister of Urban Development	Saadat Mansoor Naderi	Ghani
Minister of Energy & Water	Ali Ahmad Osmani	Abdullah
Minister of Agriculture	Assadullah Zamir	Ghani
Minister of Mines & Petroleum	Dawood Shah Saba	Ghani
Minister of Rural Development	Nasir Ahmad Durrani	Abdullah
Minister of Public Works	Mahmoud Baligh	Ghani
Minister of Transport	Mohammadullah Batash	Ghani
Minister of Women's Affairs	Delbar Nazari	Abdullah
Minister of Refugees	Sayed Hussain Alami Balkhi	Abdullah
Minister of Hajj & Religious Affairs	Faiz Mohammad Osmani	Ghani
Minister of Borders & Tribal Affairs	Gulab Mangal	Ghani
Minister of Education	Assadullah Hanif Balkhi	Abdullah
Minister of Higher Education	Farida Momand	Ghani
Minister of Health	Ferozuddin Feroz	Abdullah
Minister of Justice	Basir Anwar	Ghani
Minister of Counter-Narcotics	Salamat Azimi	Abdullah
Minister of Labor & Social Affairs	Nasrin Oryakhil	Ghani
Minister of Telecommunications & IT	Abdul Razaq Wahidi	Abdullah

As evident from the cabinet structure, both leaders attempted to strengthen their influence in parliament and other state institutions. In the National Assembly and Senate, some members supported Ghani, others supported Abdullah, while a small number acted independently. Similarly, smaller power blocs in the provinces aligned themselves either with Ghani or Abdullah (Osmani, 2019; Sharan, 2016).

10. Multi-Ethnic Power Blocs in the Second Presidency of Ashraf Ghani (2019–2021)

Afghanistan's fourth presidential election was held on September 28, 2019. The two main contenders were Ashraf Ghani, running under the slogan "State-Builder," and Abdullah Abdullah, with the slogan "Stability and Convergence." Five months after the election, the Afghan Election Commission declared Ashraf Ghani the winner. However, Abdullah rejected the results, declared them "illegal," and proclaimed himself the victor, even organizing a parallel inauguration ceremony. He pledged to form an "inclusive government" (BBC, 2020).

After nearly five months of political deadlock, the two sides signed a power-sharing agreement, under which Ghani remained president while Abdullah was appointed chairman of the High Council for National Reconciliation (Hosseini, 2020).

As in the first term, the government was divided into two main power groups. Ghani's camp itself consisted of three factions: Ghani's inner circle, the faction led by First Vice President Amrullah Saleh, and the faction of Second Vice President Sarwar Danish. Abdullah's bloc also consisted of three factions: Abdullah's own supporters, the faction led by his first deputy Babar Farahmand (backed by Abdul Rashid Dostum and the Jombesh-e Melli party), and the faction led by Asadullah Saadati, who represented Karim Khalili's Hizb-e Wahdat. Government ministries and other positions were divided between the two blocs according to the terms of the agreement (Adeli, 2020; Osmani, 2019).

11. Performance of Multi-Ethnic Power Blocs and Their Impact on State-Building in Afghanistan

State-building refers to the establishment of tangible and concrete institutions such as the army, police, bureaucracy, ministries, and the like, through recruiting human resources, training staff, providing offices and workplaces, securing necessary budgets, and passing relevant laws and regulations (Fukuyama, 2017).

Institutions play a crucial role in the process of state- and nation-building. In this process, it is necessary not only to establish institutions with specific functions but also to empower, reform, and improve the efficiency of pre-existing ones. Political leaders, in pursuit of economic and social development, must strengthen the capacity of the state to institutionalize power. Institutions carry out functions through which society can pursue the path of development; they are critical both for economic growth and human welfare (Burnell & Randall, 2013).

12. Institutional Avoidance and Weakening of Institutions

During the republican period, multi-ethnic power blocs contributed to the failure of state-building by avoiding institution-building, weakening institutions, fostering political and financial corruption, neglecting developmental values and goals, and exploiting ethnicity for political purposes. State-building during the republic era was one of the main programs—costly for both the international community and the Afghan government. Although numerous institutions were established, structural and cultural realities of Afghanistan, such as ethnic diversity, tensions, divisions, and historical rivalries, were overlooked (Ahmadi, 2011).

Institutional avoidance has a long-standing history in Afghanistan. During both Hamid Karzai's and Ashraf Ghani's governments, many issues were resolved outside institutional frameworks, often based on the preferences of multi-ethnic power blocs. Dam, in his book *One Man, One Motorcycle: How Karzai Came to Power*, wrote that Karzai, beyond his cabinet, relied on informal circles of ethnic leaders who influenced his decisions, interacting with national issues more through tribal and ethnic arrangements than through modern institutional channels (Osmani, 2019).

Institutional avoidance intensified under Ashraf Ghani. Institutions were often disregarded, and executive affairs were shaped more by personal preferences and side interests (Atraffi, 2015). In cities such as Kabul, lawbreakers allied with government officials, undermining the legitimacy of police and courts. Citizens increasingly saw institutions as weak and compromised, particularly as officials turned a blind eye to abuses and failed to protect victims (Tolo News, 2016).

Another problem was the creation of parallel institutions. To expand their influence and provide benefits for supporters, power blocs created institutions not for governance, but for personal and factional gain. For instance, Shaker Kargar was appointed as the president's special representative for Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Central Asia, despite the presence of relevant ministries. Similarly, Finance Minister Eklil Hakimi was named the president's special envoy for organizing U.S. visits, duplicating institutional mandates (Atraffi, 2015).

Over the twenty years of the republic—especially under Ghani—multi-ethnic power blocs increasingly circumvented rational-legal institutions. This behavior undermined institutional efficiency and eroded public trust. Institutions failed to perform their duties effectively or to control the personal ambitions of politicians. The National Unity Government was fragile from its inception, as its dual power blocs engaged in rapid reshuffling of officials, creation of redundant bodies, and patronage-based appointments. These practices intensified inefficiency, weakened institutions, and fueled corruption (Osmani, 2019).

13. Expansion of Corruption, Nepotism, and Patronage

Strengthening institutional capacity is a key requirement of state-building. Yet, in Afghanistan's republican era, state institutions did not gain power. Instead, corruption, nepotism, and patronage permeated public offices, preventing the development of a professional bureaucracy. Multi-ethnic power blocs treated state institutions as tools for accumulating wealth, privileges, and partisan influence. Both domestic and international reports repeatedly ranked Afghanistan among the most corrupt countries in the world. For example, Transparency International's 2019 report ranked Afghanistan 173rd out of 180 countries, with a score of 16 out of 100 (Adeli, 2020). According to these assessments, courts, the attorney general's office, and the education system were among the most corrupt institutions.

High-ranking Afghan officials themselves admitted to corruption, often accusing one another. For instance, in August 2016, President Ghani openly criticized Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, accusing his allies of blocking reforms and supporting corrupt individuals (Tolo News, 2016). Ministers also reported being threatened with fabricated corruption charges in order to compel compliance with political agendas. Ali Ahmad

Osmani, Minister of Water and Energy, recalled being pressured in cabinet meetings with fabricated corruption files to weaken his resistance to certain policies (Osmani, 2019).

Investigative reports by Afghan media further exposed the role of political families and elites in systemic corruption. The *Government of Families* report, for example, highlighted the involvement of Hamid Karzai's brothers and Mohammad Qasim Fahim in the Kabul Bank collapse, as well as the influence of political elites such as Abdul Ghafar Dawi in the National Directorate of Security (Daryaei & Pazhwak, 2017). Similarly, the political dominance of the Sayed Mansoor Naderi family secured them contracts, such as the Qara-Zaghan gold mine, which they failed to honor financially.

14. Instrumental Use of Ethnicity

Ethnic mentality and ethnicized politics have long hindered state-building in Afghanistan. During the republic, political elites consistently instrumentalized ethnicity to consolidate power and secure personal gains. The Bonn Conference institutionalized ethnic power-sharing, distributing authority among ethnic leaders (Sharan, 2016).

This dynamic enabled political families to insert loyalists into state institutions under the guise of ethnic representation. For example, when Sadeq Modaber, a Hazara, led the Presidential Office, Hazara representation reached 17 percent. However, under his successor Salam Rahimi, Tajiks and Hazaras were dismissed, while Pashtun representation rose to over 85 percent. Similar shifts occurred in other ministries depending on the ethnic identity of their leaders (Najafizadeh, 2016).

Ethnic instrumentalization fueled divisions and deepened social and cultural fragmentation. Leaders like Abdul Rashid Dostum accused Ghani of Pashtun favoritism and Abdullah of Tajik favoritism, reflecting the politicization of ethnicity at the highest levels (Najafizadeh, 2016). Although leaders presented themselves as protectors of their ethnic communities, they primarily pursued personal and familial interests, weakening national unity and obstructing state-building.

15. Conclusion

The multi-ethnic power blocs posed a serious challenge to state-building efforts in Afghanistan during the republican era and played a central role in the failure of this process. Their behavior and actions toward institutions and organizations weakened and undermined their functionality. By employing practices of patronage and favoritism, members of these power blocs penetrated state institutions and transformed them from bodies meant to deliver public and developmental services into tools serving their own personal interests.

During this period, institutions became deeply corrupted. Members of the multi-ethnic power blocs, through their appointees, squandered institutional budgets, undermined the rule of law, and avoided employing professional and competent individuals. The core leaders of these blocs, using the networks they had established, captured large institutional contracts. While reaping significant profits from these contracts, they evaded paying taxes and disregarded state authority. Their avoidance of institutional frameworks further eroded the legitimacy of the government in the eyes of the people, leaving the state unable to claim legitimate coercive power and defenseless against rival groups and institutions.

These elites often portrayed themselves as representatives of their ethnic groups in power-sharing arrangements, yet the political and economic benefits of power were largely distributed among their own families. In times of crisis and conflict, they sought refuge in their ethnic identities, but when enjoying political and economic privileges, they paid little attention to their communities. Thus, they acted in the name of ethnicity but for their own gain. This approach brought short-term and limited benefits to ethnic leaders, but the consequences for the republic and the Afghan people were deeply harmful and ultimately disastrous.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

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In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

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