

Barriers and Challenges to Establishing Political Stability in Afghanistan (2001-2024)

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Received: 2024-05-25

Revised: 2024-08-20

Accepted: 2023-08-23

Published: 2024-12-01

The political history of Afghanistan indicates that this country, except during specific periods, has not enjoyed the necessary political stability and has always been caught in crises of instability, civil war, and political conflicts. The research question in this study is: What are the causes, obstacles, and challenges to political stability in Afghanistan? What are its dependent variables? The research hypothesis suggests that the fundamental factors contributing to political instability include: a mosaic society, the lack of a unified nation, the absence of symbols of national identity, nationalism, active ethnic, linguistic-religious cleavages, the lack of political development and modernization, and the absence of an inclusive government. Additionally, the presence of fundamentalist and Salafist groups such as al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and ISIS has exacerbated this instability. The aforementioned issue can be analyzed within the framework of David Sanders' theory of political instability patterns. The research method employed in this study is descriptive and analytical, examined through causal and sociological explanations. The research approach is qualitative, the purpose of the research is applied, and its nature is exploratory. Moreover, data collection for the research has been conducted through library and documentary sources. The research findings also show that Afghanistan has repeatedly witnessed violent events such as war and occupation, revolution, rebellion, assassination, violent protests, the emergence of extremist groups like al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and ISIS, ethnic-linguistic domination and tyranny, and governments lacking legitimacy and authority, which have resulted in recurrent instability that persists to this day.

Keywords: Afghanistan, ethnic structure, political stability, Taliban, fundamentalism.

How to cite this article:

Hossaini, S. A., Rahbar, A., & Barzegar, E. (2024). Barriers and Challenges to Establishing Political Stability in Afghanistan (2001-2024). *Interdisciplinary Studies in Society, Law, and Politics*, 3(5), 180-194. <https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.isslp.3.5.17>

1. Introduction

Political instability in Afghanistan has deep roots dating back to its establishment in 1747 by Ahmad Shah Durrani, and this instability has been particularly complex and challenging over the past half-century. The country has experienced nearly every type of political system known to the world, ranging from feudalism,

emirate, and monarchy, to despotism and individual dictatorships, from constitutional monarchy and temporary, superficial democracies to communist regimes under the Khalq and Parcham parties, which claimed to be democratic governments. It has also experimented with the Islamic governance of the Mujahideen, the Islamic Emirate of the Taliban, and



Western-style democracy for two decades (Meland, 2013; Rasheed, 2022).

These political systems were neither inclusive nor derived from the will of the nation and were heavily reliant on ethnic nationalism. Consequently, there was no effort to build a unified nation, national identities, or stable political structures within these systems. Although long-lasting governments occasionally emerged, they lacked political stability, popular legitimacy, authority, full dominance, and necessary responsiveness. Governments in Third World countries generally lack the ability to align themselves with the will of their people, resulting in societies perceiving state policies as contrary to their cultural and social values. Responsiveness, in this context, means that the political system should be genuinely accountable to all citizens (Datta, 2021).

The importance of this issue lies in the fact that one of the most crucial factors influencing the development and progress of nations is sustainable political stability, which has always been an objective of rulers and leaders in human societies. For a society to develop, with activities such as civil liberties, democracy, intellectual cultivation, social justice, wealth distribution, services like education and healthcare, social and individual empowerment, advancement in science and technology, and industrialization, it is crucial to have embedded political stability, peace, and social-political cohesion. In a developed society, individuals, endowed with relative independence provided by a stable society, pursue personal and social goals, which collectively lead to a dynamic and serious society where the government facilitates and provides the necessary conditions for people to advance their activities within institutions and human organizations efficiently (Rasheed, 2022; Saikal, 2012).

The people of Afghanistan, due to a lack of awareness, low literacy levels, ethnic domination, and individual, party, and group tyranny over the past fifty years, have endured a crisis of instability, civil war, and violent phenomena. Their political protests during the reigns of the monarchy, the republic, the communist regime, the Islamic government, the Taliban, and Western-style democracy were suppressed, reaching a peak after the Soviet occupation and ultimately leading to armed uprisings. Since World War II, violent actions aimed at

overthrowing governments have been more common globally than nationwide elections (Gafoor, 2023).

The primary research question is: What are the causal and intervening obstacles and contextual conditions affecting political stability in Afghanistan? This study seeks to answer this question using causal explanations and sociological approaches by examining the causes, factors, and challenges of this phenomenon over the past four decades. Despite Afghanistan's experience with various political systems and numerous governments, political stability, as a fundamental necessity, has not been established or given serious attention. The country continues to be plagued by civil war, ethnic-linguistic and religious biases, a lack of intellectual elite circulation, the illegitimacy of political structures, the emergence of fundamentalist Salafi groups such as the Taliban, al-Qaeda, ISIS, and the Deobandi school, the increase of Jihadi schools, and more.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Political Stability and Instability

Various theories have been proposed concerning political stability and instability, each addressing the causes and factors of political instability in different societies. David Sanders' theory, presented in his book *Patterns of Political Instability* (1950), which is known for its operational perspective on political stability, is one of the central theories in identifying the causes and factors of political instability in countries worldwide. In Sanders' view, political stability is defined as the relative absence of certain types of destabilizing political events, whether in the form of changes in the power structure of the political regime and government, whether peaceful or violent, challenging the existing political power or the very structure of political authority itself. Therefore, political stability refers to a concept beyond merely the durability of governments—it means the fundamental principles of a country's political system are not threatened, and in this definition, government continuity is also included (Rasheed, 2022). According to Sanders, the criterion for political stability in a political system is the frequency and nature of events that directly affect the stability or instability of the government, regime, or society. In other words, to what extent these changes and challenges alter the usual pattern of a specific governmental system, regime, or society and to what

extent they create challenges within them (Rasheed, 2022).

Thus, according to Sanders, challenges or changes in the regime, government, and political society can relatively indicate the stability or instability of a political system. Sanders' theoretical insights are presented in three approaches: 1) Institutional Continuity Approach, 2) Empirical or Frequency Approach, and 3) Media-Centric Situation Approach (Meland, 2013).

The institutional approach explains political stability and instability by emphasizing the continuity, durability, or lack thereof in democratic or non-democratic power institutions. A stable political entity is one that maintains its institutional structure and specific framework over time, preserving it from collapse despite various political phenomena (Rasheed, 2022).

The empirical or frequency approach suggests that with the occurrence of specific types of destabilizing political events, stability changes in proportion to the frequency of such events, fluctuating in intensity. In other words, the more coups, government changes, demonstrations, street riots, civil war outbreaks, guerrilla operations, and deaths due to political violence a country experiences, the more unstable it is considered. Conversely, political stability is defined as the absence of recurring destabilizing behaviors or events, while instability is characterized by the repeated occurrence of such phenomena (Meland, 2013).

Sanders' media-centric approach, which is interpretative and analytical based on conjecture and journalistic data, is essentially a critical evaluation with a conceptual orientation. Drawing inspiration from Easton's systems theory, Sanders identifies the central focus of political instability as the structure of the political system and its components and elements. Like Easton, he views all components as interconnected elements of a specific system that, through their positive impacts and purposeful relationships, create a functioning political system that forms a cohesive whole, with political stability as its overall output. Therefore, from Sanders' perspective, if politics is understood as the authoritative allocation of values, political instability is a situation where the influence or interactions within and between the pillars and elements of the political system are disrupted, unpredictable, or uncertain. Sanders identifies the foundational elements of the political system as the legal regime, the fundamental norms of

political sovereignty, government officials and institutions, and political society, and he considers two spectra of threats—changes and challenges—as factors leading to the instability of any of these elements (Meland, 2013).

The most critical point in Sanders' conceptual approach to political instability is the deviation from the usual pattern or status quo of the political system or ruling regime. In other words, political instability occurs when the current political situation differs from the previous one. As long as a specific event indicates the continuation of a new stable and orderly situation, stability persists, but when even a single political phenomenon significantly deviates from the previous pattern, a relatively high level of instability emerges (Meland, 2013). It is worth noting that political instability does not necessarily equate to changes in governments and political regimes. There may be politically unstable systems that continue to function for many years, with governments remaining in place while only the officials change. Although such instability may negatively impact the authority and influence of governments, it does not necessarily lead to their replacement. For example, secessionist movements can cause political instability without necessarily resulting in a change in government (Rasheed, 2022).

In the operational definition of political stability and instability, some interpret it as the order in the flow of daily political interactions, others as political institutionalization, some as the predictability of political behavior, and others as the continuity and durability of the political system. Some view it as the absence of violence, while others define it as the existence of a legal regime or the absence of structural changes. Some scholars focus on a combination of these factors. Overall, the definition of stability, while not inconsistent with change, must also ensure the survival of the political system (Rasheed, 2022).

Various theorists have defined and explained political stability. For instance, some political philosophers, like Huntington, consider stability to be rooted in political institutionalization. From the perspective of modernization and development theory, the stability of any political system depends on the level of political participation by citizens or the degree of political institutionalization. Political stability in a society is maintained when, alongside the increase in political

participation by citizens, the complexity, independence, implementation of laws and regulations, coherence, durability, and accountability of political institutions also increase (Datta, 2021). Dowding and Richard Kimber, through a systems approach, define political stability as patterns of behavior (Meland, 2013; Rasheed, 2022).

Lucian Pye, in his book *Crisis and Sequences in Political Development*, links political stability to the legitimacy of the rulers. He considers the legitimacy of the political system, institutions, structures, and officials as the key factor in a country's political stability (Pye, 2001, p. 222). Melvin Best defines political stability in the realm of international relations, with a focus on the concept of balance, as follows: the state or condition of being stable, such as resistance to change, separation, or sudden overthrow. According to Best, the best form of stability is the natural kind, where a balance is maintained between needs and available resources. These basic needs can be political, socio-economic, cultural, psychological, or spiritual (Rasheed, 2022).

B.C. Smith believes that instability is typically indicated by the deviation of society's members from behavioral patterns and the expectations of political roles in events such as coups, electoral violence, and political assassinations, which are commonly considered indicators of instability. He also acknowledges that what may be destabilizing for one political structure may not necessarily be so for another (Meland, 2013). Ian Lustick, aiming to study stability in societies, refers to two sociological traditions: consensus and conflict. He finds the place for explaining stability within the conflict tradition and defines it as follows: political stability refers to the continuous operation of specific patterns of political behavior, excluding the use of illegal violence, which the general public consciously accompanies and expects to remain unchanged in the foreseeable future (Meland, 2013). The essence of Lustick's definition of stability is the continuity that the general public perceives, but from a psychological perspective, what matters to Lustick is the public's support for the political system, which can either maintain or threaten the continuity of the political system. If the government's efficiency declines for any reason, the ground for dissatisfaction is created, which, if it expands and deepens, may lead to the erosion of the political system's legitimacy and ultimately to protest behaviors, which are

the external manifestations of political instability (Rasheed, 2022).

3. Indicators of Political Stability and Instability

The criteria by which a political system can be considered stable or unstable at any given time are directly related to the occurrence or non-occurrence of changes and challenges within any government, regime, or society. Specifically, the extent to which these changes and challenges have altered the usual pattern of a particular governmental system, regime, or society, and the extent to which they have created problems or challenges within them, can be used to gauge stability. According to Sanders, these patterns themselves change over time. Challenges or changes in the regime, government, and political society can relatively indicate the stability or instability of a political unit. Therefore, according to Sanders, the indicators of stability and instability can be described as follows:

Stability of the Political System or Government: This refers to the continuity of the government or political system and the lack of change in the political system, government, or ruling political structure of the country. It includes the type of political system, political institutions such as the executive, legislative, and judiciary branches, and the absence of the resignation of the heads of the political regime, the dissolution of the constitution, or repeated changes in national laws. If political officials continue to function within the political system or government without fundamental changes or transformations, the system can be considered politically stable (Tahir, 2022).

Absence or Reduction of Destabilizing Challenges and Events: If destabilizing challenges and events such as war, rebellion, coup d'état, and assassination occur less frequently and do not result in fundamental changes or transformations in the political system, the country can be considered politically stable. Otherwise, it will be regarded as unstable. Political scholars consider other factors, such as democracy, wise and competent leadership, justice, the enhancement of public and social services, legitimacy, adherence to the law, and the participation of intellectual elites, as signs of stable political systems (Ahmad & Ihsan, 2021; Younus & Shahzad, 2020).

Leon Hurwitz, categorizing various existing approaches to political stability, emphasizes defined concepts and

predominantly from a behavioral perspective, outlining elements and criteria necessary for political stability, similar to Sanders' criteria:

- Absence of Violence in Various Forms.
- Continuity and Durability of Government Life.
- Dominance of a Legal and Legitimate Regime.
- Lack of Continuous Structural Changes in the Fundamental Political System (Hurwitz, 1973, p. 449).

Therefore, political stability is defined by indicators such as the continuity of government, absence of violence, the presence of a legitimate regime based on the constitution, and the absence of structural transformations. The better these indicators are within a political system, the more stable that system is considered to be (Owoaje et al., 2020)

4. History of Instability in Afghanistan:

"Afghan" is a name commonly used to refer to the Pashtun ethnic group. Afghanistan was established in 1747 and declared its independence in 1919 by King Amanullah after the Third Anglo-Afghan War and the signing of the Treaty of Rawalpindi. Geographically, it is a landlocked country with about 70% mountains, 13% desert, and 10% agricultural land, with the remaining area covered by forests and pastures. Afghanistan shares borders with Iran to the west, Pakistan to the south, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan to the north, and China through the Wakhan Corridor to the northeast. Afghanistan covers an area of 652,860 square kilometers, with a population of approximately 40 million. Kabul is the capital and the largest city, with other major cities being Herat in the west, Mazar-i-Sharif in the north, and Kandahar in the south. The official languages are Dari (Persian) and Pashto (a mixture of Persian, Arabic, and Hindi), and Islam is the official religion of over 99% of the population, with Shias comprising 30% (Imranullah, 2024; Yousuf, 2023).

In this study, Afghanistan's political history is divided into two periods to clearly highlight distinctions: The first period extends from the formation of Afghanistan (1747) by Ahmad Shah Durrani until the end of Daud Khan's monarchy (1973). The second period begins with the communist coup (1992) and continues through the rise of the Islamic government of the Mujahideen, the Taliban, and the end of democratic governance in 2021.

The second period of Afghanistan's political history is the primary focus of this research.

The first sparks of political instability in Afghanistan began with the assassination of Nader Shah of the Pashtun Barakzai tribe by Abdul Khaliq Hazara, instigated by the Tajik-origin Charkhi family, which stemmed from ethnic and familial despotism. After Nader Shah, his son, Mohammad Zahir Shah, ascended the throne at the age of 16 (1933-1973). During the first seventeen years, due to Zahir Shah's inexperience and young age, the government was effectively run by Prime Minister Mohammad Hashim Khan, Zahir Shah's uncle, during which time political repression and civil liberties were stifled. In this period, even the smallest criticism in the press was not allowed, and any exposure was met with severe repression, marking the entire political system as dictatorial. During World War II and the Cold War, neutrality and the expansion of political and economic relations with other nations led to Afghanistan's development, including relations with the Soviet Union and the United States in the 1950s (Gregorian Calendar). Zahir Shah, with the cooperation of national intellectuals, initiated the modernization of the country, drafted a constitution, and declared a constitutional monarchy, leading to a period of relative political stability. Ultimately, when Zahir Shah traveled to Italy for medical treatment in 1973, his cousin Daud Khan, with Soviet support and the participation of young communists, staged a coup (July 17, 1973), dissolved the parliament, abolished the constitution, and exiled Zahir Shah, ending the monarchy. Daud Khan established a pro-Soviet communist government in Afghanistan with even greater repression, marking the beginning of political instability as Afghanistan became a battleground for East-West competition (Naz, 2021).

Daud Khan's growing closeness to the West angered Kremlin officials, and during a meeting in June 1974, Brezhnev, Secretary-General of the Soviet Communist Party, severely criticized Daud's policies and warned him to avoid getting closer to Western bloc countries. However, Daud did not take this warning seriously, and on April 27, 1978, in a coup led by "Nur Mohammad Taraki," Daud Khan was killed, and a communist government was established in Afghanistan (Datta, 2021; Iqbal & Rauf, 2019).

With the rise of the communists in this coup, pressure on Islamists increased, leading to the arrest and

imprisonment of many scholars and community leaders. This prompted widespread uprisings across Afghanistan, and armed resistance began in many regions (Iqbal & Rauf, 2019).

The second wave of instability in Afghanistan began in 1979 with the military invasion and occupation by the Soviet Union. Relentless resistance by the Afghan people and Muslim Mujahideen thwarted the Soviet Union's ambitions, and in the 1980s, Soviet leader Gorbachev admitted that the military invasion of Afghanistan was a mistake, leading to the withdrawal of Soviet forces in February 1989. After the withdrawal, the puppet government led by Dr. Najibullah fell in 1992, and the Mujahideen entered Kabul (Goodman & Razi, 2017).

However, after their victory over the communist regime in Kabul, the Mujahideen of Afghanistan, due to their lack of political experience in governance, became embroiled in political, ethnic, and religious conflicts, failing to establish a unified, inclusive government (Datta, 2021; Naz, 2021).

This issue led to public dissatisfaction with the Mujahideen and prepared the ground for the emergence of extremist groups like the Taliban. The Taliban, under the banner of peace and justice for the Afghan people, quickly achieved significant victories, but their practical actions sparked a new wave of dissatisfaction. The people, intellectuals, and opposition groups became determined to change the regime. Following their support for al-Qaeda and the 9/11 attacks, the United States and the international community joined the opposition to the Taliban's Islamic Emirate (Ismail et al., 2022).

The Taliban's government, influenced by the Deobandi, Ibn Taymiyya, and Salafi doctrines, sheltered the terrorist group al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan. When al-Qaeda was accused of the September 11, 2001 attacks and the Taliban refused to hand them over to the United States, an international coalition led by the U.S. drove them out of Kabul in 2001. In December 2001, with the help of the UN Security Council and ISAF, a new government in Afghanistan was established under the Bonn Agreement, forming a republic and democracy. Karzai, followed by Ashraf Ghani, came to power with U.S. support for two decades. During these two decades, the civil war between the Republican government and the Taliban persisted, as did political disputes. Following the Qatar peace agreement

in 2021, the Taliban were returned to power by the U.S., but nearly three years later, the Taliban government has not been recognized by any country, and the civil war with opposition groups continues.

5. The Most Significant Obstacles to Political Stability in Afghanistan

5.1. Influence of Major Powers

Afghanistan, with its geopolitical location, was one of the countries that aligned with the Eastern bloc during the Cold War. After the Cold War, it remained at the center of political and ideological competition between East and West, leaving a profoundly negative impact on the country. These competitions led to deep disruptions in the geopolitical political power structure, resulting in civil unrest, the absence of a strong and inclusive central government, and historical disputes between the Pashtuns and neighboring Pakistan. Ethnic and racial ties with newly independent northern neighboring countries, the devastation, and chaos caused by a decade of resistance against the Red Army, and the negative consequences of regimes dependent on external powers all left deeply negative effects from the era of great power competition in Afghanistan (Fazlullah, 2022; Naz, 2021). The entry and exit of the former Soviet Union, present-day Russia, the U.S., Pakistan, and Iran, along with regional and extra-regional powers competing for influence and economic interests in Afghanistan, have consistently been accompanied by challenges of instability. These powers acted based on their interests and did not take practical steps to establish political stability. Therefore, a significant portion of Afghanistan's ongoing crisis can be attributed to external competitions aimed at expanding influence in the country. The presence of NATO and extra-regional powers, based on past occurrences, has not led to the containment or control of the crisis (Gafoor, 2023). The U.S.'s strategic pivot to the East, aiming to contain China, Russia, and Iran, required a firm foothold in the region, and Afghanistan, with its strategic and geopolitical characteristics, was the best option. The lack of management, foresight, and collective wisdom among Afghanistan's political elites significantly contributed to this situation over the past four decades.

5.2. *Lack of Nation-Building and National Symbols*

The mosaic society and ethnic-tribal loyalties have weakened the nation-building process in Afghanistan and have caused the erosion of national identities. Historically and strategically, Afghanistan has demonstrated a weakness in nation-building, meaning that, to date, there has been no tangible concept of a unified nation. One of the outcomes of this phenomenon is the absence of common national symbols and identities, leading to social cleavages. Afghanistan is composed of various ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups that have never viewed each other within the framework of a common national culture and identity, instead often engaging in conflicts from an ethnic and tribal perspective (Yousafzai et al., 2020). The lack of social integration, the domination of one segment of the population over the entire country, and the alignment of governments with this dynamic, coupled with the absence of political thought in creating nation-building and national identities, economic dependence, and the lack of political and social development and modernization in recent decades, are among the most significant factors contributing to political-social instability.

Furthermore, ethnic loyalty has historically taken precedence over national loyalty in Afghanistan, becoming a principle among ethnic and tribal groups. This trend faced new challenges during the Taliban's rule, leading Afghanistan towards the domination of a single ethnic group, thereby perpetuating political instability. The main consequence of this was the lack of peace, the spread of civil war, and the creation of border insecurities (Afzal, 2022). In the various governments of the monarchy, communists, Mujahideen, Taliban, republic, and imported democracy, the fundamental problem remained the lack of nation-building and the absence of national identities as the fabric necessary for resilience, typically operating under the principle of domination. Consequently, in Afghanistan's history, only the Pashtuns have been considered full citizens, while others have been second- or third-class citizens (Afzal, 2022; Amini et al., 2019; Schetter, 2005). This practice continued in the communist, Mujahideen, and 20-year democracy eras, where ethnic and racial lobbies were strong, and even under the Taliban, no attention was given to nation-building and national identities.

The Taliban government has pressured non-Pashtun ethnic groups, particularly Hazaras, Shias, Uzbeks, and Persian speakers, through forced migrations, the seizure of homes and lands, threats, killings, imprisonment, and expulsions from ancestral lands. This has created deep ethnic, linguistic, and religious divides, pushing the country to the brink of separatism. The lack of internal authority and the intensification of ethnic conflicts in Afghanistan have exacerbated political anarchy and chaos within the country, with regional repercussions affecting the border security of neighboring countries (Ahmed, 2017; Din, 2021).

5.3. *Failed States*

The influence of major powers and the impact of regional powers have resulted in the central government in Afghanistan remaining weak. Consequently, in Afghanistan's contemporary history, governments have never enjoyed long-term governance and often became failed states due to their weakness against society (Teston et al., 2021). Absolute and constitutional monarchies, self-proclaimed republics, and lifelong regimes, as well as the communist regimes of Khalq and Parcham, the Islamic government of the Mujahideen, Western democracy, and Taliban fundamentalism have all emerged over the past four decades in Afghanistan. However, none of these changes could establish political stability, as the existing structures were fundamentally flawed, lacked legitimacy, public participation, and were dependent on specific ethnic groups or factions.

The lack of firm national symbols and identities, excessive ethnic nationalism, and the geographic dispersion of ethnic groups in specific regions have established a situation where ethnic and linguistic sovereignty prevails in Afghanistan. For example, the Pashtuns dominate the south and southeast, the Tajiks the west and northwest, the Uzbeks the north, and the Persian-speaking Shias have a majority in central regions. Thus, in the classification of state-nation, Afghanistan is defined and typologized as a weak state-weak nation (Teston et al., 2021).

Sometimes, these governments only had control over specific cities or just the capital, with the central government lacking authority and dominance over the entire country, as seen during the communist regime of Najibullah and the Islamic Mujahideen. From this perspective, instability is considered an internal crisis.

The primary source of this crisis, which gradually eroded the legitimacy and authority of Afghanistan's governments, lies within the state itself (Ahmed, 2017; Teston et al., 2021). The influence of ethnic, linguistic, and religious factions, the interference of regional powers and neighbors, who sometimes openly pressured the Kabul regime to make structural changes and appointments, and the weakness in effective executive power, have been additional barriers to stability in Afghanistan.

5.4. *Dictatorship and Dependent Governments:*

Throughout Afghanistan's political history, most political systems have been based on individual despotism, whether under emirs, kings, or presidents, founded on power, domination, and the logic of control. Only during the last ten years of Zahir Shah's monarchy, known as the "First Democracy," were conditions for political and economic reforms established, but even this was thwarted by Daud Khan's coup.

Daud Khan's dictatorship marked the first wave of modern instability in Afghanistan, preventing political and social development, parliamentary systems, civil liberties, and media freedom, turning into individual despotism. This sequence continued with Taraki, Amin, Karmal, and Dr. Najibullah, all of whom formed governments dependent on the former Soviet Union. After the fall of the Taliban, the second democratic system was outlined at the Bonn Conference by the United States and the international coalition, aiming to reach political consensus among elites and establish a democratic system with the participation of all ethnic groups, moving beyond internal conflicts to form a stable and enduring government. Abraham Lincoln famously defined democracy as "government of the people, by the people, for the people" (Younus & Shahzad, 2020).

The most significant consequences of the Cold War and the competition of great powers in Afghanistan were the weakening of the central government, hindering nation-building projects, creating a national identity, and resulting in political and economic dependence on neighboring countries. Internal influences, public and political disobedience to puppet governments, the establishment of the Islamic government, and the inefficiency of the Mujahideen government paved the way for the emergence of the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and the

growth of fundamentalism and terrorism in the country (Younus & Shahzad, 2020).

In most cases, power transfers were accompanied by violence, civil war, coups, revolutions, or foreign intervention, indicating the weakness of governments, public dissatisfaction, or tribal conflicts, all leading to ongoing political instability.

Finally, with the U.S.-Taliban agreement in Qatar, without the involvement of the Kabul regime, the 20-year democratic government unexpectedly changed. A regime that had a vast presidential apparatus, a cabinet full of advisors, a parliament, a judiciary, about a hundred political parties, various social organizations, civil society institutions, and a High Council for National Reconciliation, along with a Defense Ministry, Interior Ministry, and National Security, equipped with modern weapons and led by thousands of military personnel and commanders, all collapsed in 11 days. Everything that had been touted as nation-building, good governance, the realization of democracy, and human rights over the past 20 years turned out to be imported slogans, merely a cover for invasion and occupation, lacking any deep-rooted credibility among the people. When the U.S. strategy changed, the system was left on the brink of collapse (Younus & Shahzad, 2020).

5.5. *Ethnic Despotism and Extreme Tribalism*

The most prominent and defining characteristic of Afghan society is its tribal nature. Ahmad Shah Durrani, as the founder of modern Afghanistan, was the first to link politics with tribalism, establishing his new state on the foundation of ethnic nationalism (Pashtunwali). Subsequent rulers continued to build Afghanistan on this flawed basis, eventually transforming it into a closed, unbalanced tribal society. Tribal mentality refers to the mindset where members of a tribe pursue a common goal, defending the tribe in all circumstances, against anyone, whether right or wrong. This sense of unity, called "asabiyyah," is accompanied by traditions that function as a constitution, governing internal and external relationships. Tribal culture, characterized by intolerance, irrationality, the fostering of asabiyyah, lack of active social mobility, immutable social stratification, absence of national cohesion, the sterility of modernism, and political infertility, is deeply embedded (Afzal, 2022).

Ethnic and tribal culture is one of the fundamental obstacles to political stability in Afghanistan, as this culture does not tolerate anything outside its own beliefs and does not accept collective unity at the national level. Socialization within tribal culture has led to the destruction of economic and civil institutions, as well as the social and cultural institutions of the country (Afzal, 2022).

Since the establishment of modern Afghanistan until the present (1126 AH - 2024), the government has been almost exclusively in the hands of the Pashtun ethnic group from various tribes (Afzal, 2022), with only two non-Pashtun leaders, Tajik and Hazara, holding short-term power, both of whom were killed by Pashtuns. Among Afghan rulers, many were killed (Timur Shah, Shah Shuja, Abdul Rahman, Habibullah, Habibullah Kalakani, Nadir Shah, Mohammad Daud, Nur Mohammad Taraki, Hafizullah Amin, Najibullah, and Burhanuddin Rabbani); one was blinded by having stakes driven into his eyes (Shah Zaman); eight rulers fled the country (Azam Khan, Yaqub Khan, Amanullah, Inayatullah, Zahir Shah, Babrak Karmal, Mullah Omar, and Ashraf Ghani); and six rulers (Timur, Sher Ali Khan, Azam Khan, Yaqub Ali Khan, Inayatullah, and Zahir Shah) came to power through inheritance. The Hazara and Shia populations, in particular, were always excluded from power, and until 1963, they were not even protected by law (a relatively democratic constitution was drafted and approved that year) (Afzal, 2022).

Even today, in the Taliban's Islamic Emirate, Pashtun ethnicity and the Pashto language are given priority, with all specialist positions being replaced by young, inexperienced Talibs, and Pashtuns and their families enjoying many advantages. When complaints about this discrimination arise, it is often justified by saying that they lived in the wilderness and mountains for years and deserve more comfort.

This pattern has persisted since Afghanistan's independence and remains a major cause of instability due to the ethnic and religious foundations of governance. This issue dates back to Ahmad Shah Durrani (Durrani) as the founder of the modern state, and continued through his successors, including Shah Zaman, Shah Shuja, Emir Dost Mohammad Khan, his son Emir Sher Ali Khan, his grandson Mohammad Yaqub Khan, Emir Abdul Rahman Khan, his son Habibullah Khan, Amanullah Khan, and the only non-Pashtun ruler,

Habibullah Kalakani, a Tajik and Persian speaker known as "Bacha-i-Saqao" (the water carrier's son), who succeeded Amanullah Khan but ruled for only nine months before being killed by Nadir Shah with the help of Pashtuns from Pakistan. After Nadir Shah, his son Zahir Shah, and later Mohammad Daud, also from the Pashtun tribe, came to power, all believed that rule and power were divinely granted to their tribe. This mentality still prevails among the Pashtuns and the Taliban, and any dissenting thought is suppressed under the pretext of preventing division and war.

5.6. *Religious Fundamentalism and the Deobandi School*

When Afghanistan was occupied by the Soviet Red Army, many Afghans migrated to Pakistan and settled in refugee camps, where a significant number of the children of these refugees were absorbed into religious schools associated with the Deobandi school of thought. It is from these schools that groups like the Taliban and ISIS emerged. Afghanistan is situated at the crossroads of three major empires: the Indian subcontinent, Iran, and Central Asia. While the winds of popular movements in the early Islamic centuries blew from the east of Khorasan and Sistan towards Afghanistan, the fires of religious movements that engulfed Afghanistan from the 16th century until the end of the 20th century were kindled in India. These fires frequently blazed along the eastern borders and later manifested in the form of regional fundamentalism (Salafism) in Afghanistan and Pakistan, particularly through the Taliban, which has its roots in the teachings of the Deobandi school (Joya & Rahimi, 2023).

The Deobandi school system has expanded significantly in recent decades, attracting young Muslims from various parts of the Indian subcontinent. Since the years of the Afghan jihad, Deobandism has become the most popular Islamic school of thought among the Pashtuns living on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. The elders of the Darul Uloom Deoband school are followers of the Hanafi jurisprudence. Geographical proximity, ease of movement between the two countries, and shared ethnic, religious, and linguistic characteristics facilitated the spread of Deobandi teachings among the Pashtun tribe and the Taliban in Afghanistan, making Deobandism the main source of intellectual and doctrinal inspiration for the Taliban. Many Taliban members, particularly numerous

commanders and elites of the group, received religious and military education in these schools (Joya & Rahimi, 2023).

Today, the views of Deobandi religious elites and thinkers in Pakistan and Afghanistan have transformed into a radical religious movement, particularly represented by Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, led by Maulana Fazlur Rehman. This movement largely reflects the religious tendencies and culture of the tribal areas in northwestern Pakistan, as well as in Bangladesh and southern Afghanistan, where the Pashtun ethnic group predominates. Over the past four decades, this movement has increasingly aligned itself with Pashtun ethnic nationalism. Additionally, numerous militant and extremist groups in these countries draw inspiration from the ideas and beliefs of Deobandi thinkers. The Deobandi school is opposed to Shias and instructs its followers to avoid relations with Shias and to consider them as infidels.

5.7. *Unbalanced Human and Cultural Geography*

The political and human geography of Afghanistan has always been based on ethnic loyalties and geographical features, coupled with a lack of central government authority. Therefore, the state in Afghanistan is often referred to as "subnational," meaning that the government is subject to the loyalties of subnational groups, including tribes and clans. The dominant tribes have held power since the formation of Afghanistan, with the Pashtun ethnic group taking on this role from the beginning until today (Jones, 2004, p. 19). Afghanistan is recognized as a country of crises, and over the past four decades, the continuous state of war and insecurity has diminished the people's belief in the long-term resolution of conflict. War has become a part of daily life, and political stability is seen as a potential, though often elusive, solution to prolonged conflict. Efforts for peace have a long history, matching the duration of the conflict, but they have faced various challenges throughout different periods (Ahmed, 2017).

Political analysts primarily attribute instability and political crises to the following factors: 1) Ethnic composition, 2) Religious composition, 3) Linguistic composition, 4) Geographic distribution of ethnic groups and population, 5) Power struggles among group leaders, 6) Illiteracy and low literacy rates, 7) Political views, and 8) Widespread poverty (Parkes, 2019).

5.8. *Ancient Customs and Traditions*

In third-world countries like Afghanistan, institutions of tradition, religion, ideology, culture, customs, influential political parties, religious schools, mosques, tribal institutions, and councils play significant roles in influencing the masses. These institutions can either positively or negatively affect political stability through their influence. In Afghanistan, these institutions have been very active and have played a fundamental role in the country's stability and instability in recent decades. Afghanistan is composed of various ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups that have never viewed each other within the framework of a common national culture and identity. Instead, they have often been in conflict with one another from an ethnic and tribal perspective (Parkes, 2019).

Afghanistan is a country where tradition-based culture prevails, with few manifestations of modern society. As a result, political and social protests tend to quickly escalate into violent actions. According to Sanders' indicators of instability, Afghanistan, due to its cultural interactions and level of political awareness, has rarely engaged in political protests. Instead, critical movements have typically taken a violent and armed form, often incited by speeches from religious and national thinkers. This pattern has been observed since the era of Pashtun dominance during the monarchy, continuing to affect other ethnic groups to some extent (Fazlullah, 2022).

Thus, in Afghanistan's history, most political protests have been associated with the communist regime, reaching a peak following the Soviet occupation, eventually leading to armed uprisings. With the rise of social awareness and the use of mass media over the past 20 years, and the period of democratic social freedoms, there has been an increase in civil society. The general public has taken advantage of this opportunity to engage in social movements, such as the Enlightenment Movement, labor demands, and international political events like Quds Day and support for the Palestinian people through peaceful protests (Afzal, 2022; Akhtar, 2023).

Since the formation of the Taliban's second Emirate (2021), the group's ethnic despotism and specific interpretations of Islam and Sharia law, along with the imposition of numerous restrictions on women—such as closing educational institutions for women, dismissing

female employees, and limiting women's presence in society—have led to daily peaceful protests by women in urban centers, challenging the legitimacy of the Taliban government. These protests are usually met with extreme violence and suppression (Afzal, 2022; Gafoor, 2023; Imrannullah, 2024; Lamberti-Castronuovo, 2024).

5.9. *Lack of Intellectual Elite Circulation*

According to elite theory, the most significant characteristics of an unbalanced society are the rule of non-elites, the lack of elite circulation, and the failure to utilize the intellectual capacities of thinkers and scholars to reform societal affairs. Since the reign of Zahir Shah, Nadir Shah, and Daud, political thinkers, elites, writers, intellectuals, journalists, and poets have been severely repressed in Kabul and other provinces for protesting against the government. This repression led to the first sparks of the desire for freedom, demands for a supra-ethnic government, and peaceful protests. However, these movements were brutally suppressed through torture, imprisonment, and execution, which became one of the major factors contributing to the political system's instability.

The influence of Afghanistan's national-religious thinkers through interaction with key players, helping to shape national and ethnic-linguistic identity and cohesion, promoting sectarian reconciliation, and providing stability-oriented strategies—along with participating in the political structure and specialized meetings to reform affairs and provide social enlightenment, changing the mindset of officials, increasing the efficiency and accountability of government institutions, creating conditions for homogeneous development, fostering social cohesion and participation, and preventing violent conflicts—can contribute to political stability in Afghanistan. By using their influence and popularity, these thinkers can push politicians to adopt rationality and collective wisdom, driving positive factors that contribute to stability (Akhtar, 2023).

The essential characteristic of intellectual elites is that, although they represent a minority, their decisions and influences affect the majority of society. In fact, elites are individuals and groups who, due to the power they acquire and the impact they have, or through the decisions they make, or the ideas, emotions, and

excitements they generate, play a crucial role in the historical actions of society (Akhtar, 2023).

The role of national-religious thinkers in Afghanistan's political stability can be understood as follows: Given the strategic and sensitive role of national-religious thinkers in Afghanistan's traditional society, the lack of elite participation in the political structure, the failure to establish national identity and cohesion, the rise of ethnic nationalism, religious bigotry, dogmatism, the absence of supra-ethnic governments, dependency on foreign factors, migration abroad, the presence of fundamentalist groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda, the influence of neighboring countries, corruption, and the absence of political organization, all contradict the national interests of the Afghan people. These factors have caused irreparable damage and contributed to ongoing crises and instability.

5.10. *Lack of Dialogue and Elimination of Rivals*

The absence of political dialogue among influential political and social elites is a serious challenge to establishing political stability. The ruling political elites in Afghanistan have not only lacked a unified ideological and discursive framework but have also continuously struggled with internal conflicts (Fazlullah, 2022).

Ethnic diversity in the country was one reason why the West and Afghan groups supported the formation of a multi-ethnic democratic government. However, it appears that the Bonn Conference formula for establishing a multi-ethnic democratic system failed to produce desirable results in nation-building in Afghanistan due to the radicalization of ethnic identities at the level of political elites and nationalist writers (Naz, 2021). Ethnic tensions and political conflicts have always indicated a preference for eliminating rivals through violent confrontations, as well as sidelining dialogue and engagement with political opponents, thereby perpetuating political instability. This situation has led to tribal goals replacing national objectives in the country, further exacerbating ethnic tensions (Takhshid & Mansouri Moghadam, 2008, p. 140). The new political system emerging from the Bonn Agreement followed this pattern, with key positions being monopolized by the Pashtun ethnic group. This merely addressed the symptoms of war and political turmoil without resolving the fundamental problem of nation-building, national identity formation, and political stability.

Afghan thinkers believe that the absence of dialogue and engagement in past governments is a significant reason for political instability. Given that the democracy-building project was also an imported idea, lacking the necessary infrastructure and dialogue, and that its specific interpretation clashed with the society's traditional and religious values, despite significant progress, there were numerous shortcomings. These issues hindered political and social stability over the past two decades. Therefore, a form of independent political discourse that is suited to Afghanistan's multi-ethnic context could be effective, involving the formation of civil structures, nation-building, and the separation of powers, while respecting minority rights, addressing social divisions, and providing the necessary infrastructure for civil and political freedoms, including freedom of expression, thought, and the press.

5.11. *Ignoring the Taliban at the Bonn Conference and Loya Jirga*

The United States and Western countries, as organizers of the Bonn Conference and the Loya Jirga in Afghanistan, knowingly or unknowingly sowed the seeds of unrest and instability by excluding one of the most significant political actors at the time—the Taliban. The decision not to include the Taliban as a participant in the Afghan government raises many questions about whether this exclusion was accidental, negligent, or deliberate, and who might have been involved in this conspiracy. This exclusion continued the crisis, allowing those who orchestrated it to reap the benefits and perpetuate instability in the country (Naz, 2021).

The absence of appropriate strategies for governance, structural weaknesses, the lack of necessary infrastructure, the absence of experienced and specialized human resources, and the disregard for intellectual thinkers and elites in Afghanistan contributed to the government's inability to meet the people's demands. Violence and insecurity, the onset of a civil war with the Taliban, attempts to restrict media freedom and freedom of expression, and the neglect of political parties' demands—all led to the exclusion of ethnic groups and intellectuals from participating in the government, including the Taliban. Widespread political and social corruption, the failure to develop economic infrastructure, negative political competition between Hamid Karzai, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, Ashraf Ghani, and

ethnic and political leaders during a period when Afghanistan was at the center of global interactions, posed new challenges and threatened the political system's foundation (Gafloor, 2023).

The departure from the provisions of the Bonn Agreement was one of the most significant challenges of this period. Despite the efforts of national and religious intellectuals to include the Taliban in the government to establish political stability, this issue remained unresolved. The government's lack of active diplomacy with the Taliban, the failure to negotiate directly to integrate the group into the central government, the exclusion of the Taliban from power, widespread administrative and economic corruption, the neglect of the Taliban's potential, electoral fraud, and the disregard for the people's right to vote all contributed to the failure of the 20-year democracy project and the resulting instability in Afghanistan.

5.12. *Ethnic Composition*

One of the most significant and prominent characteristics of Afghan society is its tribal nature. Ahmad Shah Durrani, as the founder of modern Afghanistan, was the first to link politics with tribalism, basing the foundation of his nascent state on ethnic nationalism (Pashtunwali) (Afzal, 2022). Subsequent rulers continued to build Afghanistan on this flawed basis, ultimately transforming the country into a closed, unbalanced tribal society (Schetter, 2005). According to the elite theory, the most important features of an unbalanced society are the rule of non-elites, the lack of elite circulation, and the failure to utilize the intellectual capacities of thinkers and scholars to reform societal affairs.

Tribal mentality refers to the mindset where members of a tribe pursue a common goal—defending the tribe under any circumstances, against anyone, whether right or wrong. This sense of unity, known as "asabiyyah," is accompanied by traditions that function as a constitution, governing internal and external relationships (Schetter, 2005). Tribal culture is characterized by features such as intolerance, irrationality, the fostering of asabiyyah, lack of active social mobility, immutable social stratification, absence of national cohesion, the sterility of modernism, and political infertility (Afzal, 2022; Goodman & Razi, 2017). Socialization resulting from tribal culture has led to the

destruction of economic, civil, social, and cultural institutions in the country (Goodman & Razi, 2017; Schetter, 2005).

Afghanistan is composed of various ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups that have never viewed each other within the framework of a common national culture and identity, instead often engaging in conflicts from an ethnic and tribal perspective (Afzal, 2022; Goodman & Razi, 2017; Schetter, 2005). This characteristic has persisted since Afghanistan's independence and is one of the main reasons for the country's instability, particularly the formation of ethnically and religiously based governments. This issue dates back to Ahmad Shah Durrani (the founder of the modern state) and continued through his successors, including Shah Zaman, Shah Shuja, Emir Dost Mohammad Khan, his son Emir Sher Ali Khan, his grandson Mohammad Yaqub Khan, Emir Abdul Rahman Khan, his son Habibullah Khan, and Amanullah Khan (son of Habibullah), as well as the only non-Pashtun ruler, Habibullah Kalakani, a Tajik and Persian speaker known as "Bacha-i-Saqao" (the water carrier's son). Kalakani, who succeeded Amanullah Khan, ruled for only nine months before being killed by Nadir Shah with the help of Pashtuns from Pakistan. After Nadir Shah, his son Zahir Shah, and later Mohammad Daud, all from the Pashtun tribe, came to power, believing that rule and power were divinely granted to their tribe (Goodman & Razi, 2017; Schetter, 2005). This mentality continues to dominate the Pashtuns and the Taliban, with any dissenting thought being suppressed under the pretext of preventing division and war.

Since the reign of Zahir Shah, Nadir Shah, and Daud, intellectuals, political elites, writers, intellectuals, journalists, and poets have been severely repressed in Kabul and other provinces for protesting against the government. This repression led to the first sparks of the desire for freedom, the demand for a supra-ethnic government, and peaceful protests, although these were brutally suppressed through torture, imprisonment, and execution. This was one of the significant factors contributing to the instability of the political system.

Afghanistan, from a social structure and historical perspective, has always been a fragmented society. This has consistently allowed regional and extra-regional countries to influence Afghanistan's internal affairs through their connections with internal groups. Among Afghanistan's neighbors, Iran and Pakistan have had the

most significant involvement in its internal issues due to their cultural affinity with segments of Afghanistan's population. This cultural, historical, linguistic, ethnic, and religious affinity has led to the most reciprocal and peaceful interactions between the nations of both sides. Moreover, the largest waves of Afghan migration have been to Iran and Pakistan (Afzal, 2022; Goodman & Razi, 2017).

Although the Mujahideen were unable to implement their desired programs, they created a discourse structured around key concepts such as Islam, jihad, resistance to occupation and foreign presence, ethnicity, and Islamic governance (Goodman & Razi, 2017).

Over time, Afghan society underwent significant changes, the most important being the shift in perception towards jihadist parties, which were once promoted and financially supported. The people witnessed the power struggles and infighting over power, realizing that the wars were no longer justified as legitimate resistance against foreign invaders but were instead battles for power among different parties and ethnic groups.

6. Conclusion:

Political leaders have always sought the continuity and stability of their governance, and political philosophy has made every effort to correct governance along the right path and maintain social norms to reduce violence, protests, and wars, thereby ensuring political stability, peace, and security for the people.

The tribal fabric and tradition-bound culture, which lacks signs of development and modernity, coupled with illiteracy, ancient customs, and intense religious and sectarian prejudices, have led to political and social protests quickly turning into violent actions and armed conflicts. If we assess Afghanistan's instability through Sanders' lens, it becomes clear that, due to the nature of cultural interactions and the level of political awareness, Afghans have seldom engaged in political protests. Instead, dissent typically manifests in violent and armed actions, often triggered and inflamed by ethnic leaders and religious and national thinkers, taking on an extreme form.

According to various definitions by political thinkers regarding political stability, the key point is that political stability refers to the balance between social demands and the functional capacity of the political system. In other words, if a ruling political system can adequately

respond to the diverse demands of the people and align itself with the beliefs and ideologies accepted and endorsed by society, it will be stable.

Sanders outlines numerous practical and realistic factors contributing to the instability of political systems, all of which can be directly experienced by individuals within the society. These factors not only help identify instability but also provide prescriptive solutions to address it. Almost all of the instability factors and elements in Sanders' theory have occurred or are currently occurring in Afghanistan, leading to political and social instability over the past four decades, as illustrated below.

The most significant consequences of the Cold War and the competition between great powers in Afghanistan have been the weakening of the central government, hindering nation-building projects, the creation of a national identity, political and economic dependence on neighboring countries, internal influence, and public and political disobedience to puppet governments. The establishment of an Islamic government, the inefficiency of the Mujahideen government, and the emergence of the Taliban and al-Qaeda have led to the growth of fundamentalism and terrorism in the country.

After the collapse of the communist regime, the government formed by the Mujahideen was very unsuccessful in managing the country's affairs. With the fall of Najibullah's communist government, the Mujahideen faced difficulties in governing, leading to unprecedented bloody conflicts across most of the country, particularly in Kabul, and resulting in widespread political and social instability.

Given Afghanistan's political history, the country has experienced nearly every political system, from feudalism, emirate, and monarchy to individual despotism and dictatorship, constitutional monarchy, temporary and superficial democracies, the communist regimes of Khalq and Parcham claiming democratic governance, the Islamic government of the Mujahideen, the Islamic Emirate of the Taliban, and Western-style democracy for two decades. However, none of these political systems achieved lasting stability and were always entangled in serious political and social challenges.

Most of Afghanistan's governments have not been inclusive or based on the will of the people and have instead relied heavily on ethnicity. As a result, national

identities and symbols and nation-building never took shape in these governments, preventing the formation of a unified entity. On the other hand, most political systems faced crises of legitimacy, authority, and dominance. Although some governments were long-lasting, they lacked internal legitimacy.

Furthermore, in most political systems, there was no rotation of elites or meritocracy. Instead, elites were either suppressed, exiled, or sentenced to long-term imprisonment or execution. Even when there was a rotation of elites, it usually occurred along ethnic, linguistic, or religious lines, preventing the formation of a government that represented the entire population and all ethnicities.

It can be said that the struggle for central power and the effort to legitimize a particular ethnic group have led to 40 years of civil war in Afghanistan, marked by ethnic and linguistic despotism. The lack of political, social, and economic foresight, the inability to deeply understand political issues, playing into the hands of regional and extra-regional powers, the influence and interference of foreign powers, the dependency of political and military leaders on external forces, the lack of mutual acceptance and dialogue among political factions, and the formation of non-inclusive, limited, ethnic-linguistic, and religious governments based on the idea of ethnic dominance, the struggle against the Persian language and Shia religion, and the imposition of the dominant ethnic group's culture and language are all problems that have led to political and social instability.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

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

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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