

Political Elites and the Reproduction of Contemporary Political Culture in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

This research, grounded in Almond and Verba's theory and the influence of political elites (both ethnic and religious), explores the development of modern political culture in Afghanistan. The results reveal that Afghanistan's political culture is predominantly top-down, driven by elites, as civil institutions and the political-economic framework have fostered an environment where true popular engagement is not achieved. Following the Taliban's fall in 2001, elites from Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek communities, utilizing ethnic-tribal structures and traditional networks, assumed a pivotal role in shaping policy and legitimizing political power. These elites pursued two primary approaches: firstly, political decisions often influenced by ethnic and economic interests, which exacerbated social divisions; secondly, the encouragement of identity-based and authoritarian behaviors, such as ethnic nationalism and religious influence in the public domain, which undermined rational and democratic participation patterns. A key highlight of this study is the underdeveloped political state, where political rationality—including tolerance, moderation, long-term planning, and proceduralism—has yet to become a fundamental value among elites and citizens. Characteristics like distrust, opportunism, and allegiance to individuals rather than the system have sustained an ineffective political culture instead of bolstering democratic institutions. Ultimately, this study underscores that reforming Afghanistan's political culture is unattainable without altering the behaviors, attitudes, and values of the elites. A gradual shift from political immaturity to maturity—marked by tolerance, proceduralism, long-term planning, and the proactive role of elites—is crucial for achieving political progress and active citizen involvement.

Keywords: Political culture, Political elites, Political participation, Political maturity, Almond and Verba

INTRODUCTION

Almond and Verba contend that political culture emerges from the "collective history" of a political system and the individuals within it, with a foundation in the actions, values, and interests of political participants (Elazar, 1972). This research supports Almond and Verba's viewpoint, concluding that the values and behaviors of political elites create or influence an elite political culture, which in turn impacts governance styles and public reactions. Political culture is shaped by individuals, especially political elites; their beliefs and perceptions about governance—particularly their thoughts and attitudes toward political power—are crucial in forming this culture. Baba also supports this notion, asserting that elite political culture is shaped by the values of political elites (Omodia, 2011).

Political culture includes the behavioral aspects of political elites and actions influenced by historical events and the values of elites (Diamond, 1993); these behaviors directly affect government policymaking (Chilton, 1998). Afghanistan's political landscape aligns with the views of Reisinger, Jones, Almond, and Verba, where the values and personal interests of political actors influence leader selection, electoral campaigns, and political developments.

According to Almond and Verba, political culture is characterized by a framework of factual beliefs, expressive symbols, and values that define the contexts in which political actions take place (Matlosa, 2003). This definition suggests that the political behaviors of elites are shaped by a consistent pattern influenced by their personal interests and values. This is evident in Afghanistan's political history, where elite conduct during elections and governance exhibits a similar pattern. Consequently, both collective and individual political attitudes influence

the processes of political culture that have developed in Afghanistan's political landscape. Thus, the attitudes of political elites toward governance are heavily shaped by the values they associate with the governance process—values that are rooted in their perception of access to state power (Baba, 2015).

These public perceptions and beliefs about politics, along with the emotions they evoke, contribute to social dissatisfaction and the rise of social movements. The segment of society that chooses to engage with the ruling structure and support social movements through ethnic, religious, ideological, or social connections demonstrates a predictable response; a response that political elites take advantage of. This behavioral pattern mirrors elite actions in political campaigns and reward-based networks (Khosravi & Shahsavari Fard, 2016).

Following the overthrow of the Taliban government in 2001, political elites representing a variety of ethnic and religious groupings, including Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks, became important political players in Afghanistan. Their impact was a result of historical legacies and sociopolitical networks that were intricately woven throughout Afghanistan's intricate web of tribal dependents and allegiances, rather than just reflecting demographic reality (Acikgoz et al., 2025). These people frequently function at the nexus of contemporary state institutions and traditional power structures, carefully striking a balance between their ethnic constituents and the federal government, as Giustozzi (2009) pointed out.

Given that many governmental failures to achieve social justice, inclusive political participation, and sustainable civic engagement are caused by unhealthy politico-cultural patterns, a scientific and critical examination of Afghanistan's "political culture pathologies" is unquestionably necessary. Ethnic-religious discrimination, ideological interpretations of religion, traditional leaders' interventions, and a lack of a culture of accountability and critique are all factors that frequently contribute to these tendencies (Acikgoz et al., 2025). The function and role of ethnic and religious elites is one of the most important factors sustaining these maladies. Instead of encouraging national unity and healthy political participation, these individuals, who frequently wield power through kinship ties, religious influence, or ethnic affiliations, often reinforce ethnonationalist discourses, deepen social divides, and use religion and ethnic identity as tools to gain or hold onto power.

These tiny organizations have a role in the development and perpetuation of an authoritarian, dominance-oriented, and personality-centered political culture by directly influencing the political beliefs and actions of the general public. They concurrently oppose the growth of democratic institutions and turn official institutions into tools of ethnic and group interests by utilizing traditional power resources (Hasanifar & Zarbighalehhamami, 2023).

In light of these facts, it is essential to know how ethnic and religious leaders shape Afghanistan's political culture and examine the pathologies that arise in order to understand why state-building and democratic initiatives have failed in Afghan society. Using a qualitative and analytical methodology, this study looks at Afghanistan's political elites and the spread of modern political culture.

The main research questions are:

1. What role have political elites played in shaping the political attitudes and behaviors of the people?
2. What factors have sustained the influence and legitimacy of political elites within Afghanistan's political structure?

This research is qualitative in nature. Hypotheses are not required in qualitative research that aims to investigate and comprehend the status of a variable. The topic of analyzing the function of ethnic leaders is aptly represented by the political events of the republican era. Given the chosen approach and the opinions and viewpoints of the participants, a more thorough and in-depth explanation of the function of ethnic leaders in this context will be provided.

Theoretical Framework

Almond and Sidney Verba

In their seminal work *The Civic Culture* (1963), Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba established the theory of

political culture. Since then, it has been regarded as one of the most contentious theories in political science, and its adaptability in the face of damaging criticisms has had an equally significant impact (Pavone, 2014). Those who voice discontent and skepticism are the ones advocating for it. This has resulted in powerful comebacks in the field of political science research after painful or calculated periodic retreats from the front (Voinea, 2020).

Little has changed in the traditional conceptual underpinnings of this theory since it was first published in the early 1960s. While voices highlighting the lost philosophical backdrop get louder and more numerous as their analyses become more in-depth, the classical view gains method and connection. In the meantime, although it continued to be more contentious, the cultural issue maintained its importance. All of this explains what political culture theory refers to as the problem. Additionally, it highlights the research aspects of political culture as well as the trends that periodically surface as a result of different conceptual and methodological advancements. Here, it is this methodological aspect that draws our focus.

Two fundamental perspectives can be mentioned for a better understanding of the trends in political culture research:

One seems to be a methodical approach to determining a basic idea. It's possible that traditional political culture theory shares this mindset. Additionally, it might be a simpler idea that might offer a shared (ontological) framework for researching the citizen and the state, who are connected by a connection that is essential to both. The evolution of classical political culture theory toward modernization theory and human development over the past 20 years has validated this viewpoint (Inglehart et al., 2003; Welsh, 2013). It recognizes value as the key idea for understanding intricately linked dynamics and researching the connection between citizens and the state. This viewpoint demonstrates that finding a shared conceptual foundation for the state and the citizen should lead to the ontological explanation of classical political culture theory. It is reasonable to assume that other prevalent conceptual frameworks, such as emotions, will be taken into account here (Heaney, 2019). Luhmann's theory is still highly intriguing because it proposes meaning as the most fundamental idea that can explain the complex dynamics of citizen-state and their relationships, even though it is not totally apparent from a theoretical and methodological standpoint.

The alternative viewpoint portrays a swift process of determining one (or a group of) basic mechanisms and processes that can explain the intricate relationship between the state and its inhabitants as vital parts of a more complex whole. This could include a collection of social and political mechanisms and processes that have been researched and analyzed by political theory, social and political psychology, and classical social sciences, as well as their interdisciplinary combinations with other sciences like anthropology or economics (Vigna, 2020).

Talcott Parsons's writings had a significant impact on Almond and Verba's notion of political culture. This is why their theory places such a strong emphasis on the role that norms, values, and beliefs play in the interaction between the people and the government. The way that individuals absorb the "political system" (both as a whole and as its components) in their "cognitions, emotions, and evaluations" is the basis of the psychological perspective that its founders noted on the cultural dimension. As a result, the phrase "political culture" describes particular political philosophies, such as perspectives on the political system and its components and perspectives on one's place within it. The particular distribution of patterns of orientation toward political objects among a nation's citizens is known as its political culture (Almond & Verba, 1936: 12–13).

This theory adds "culture" to the basic equation of democratic political dynamics by establishing a complicated two-way link between the people and the government. The approach uses two key ideas—open politics and civic culture—for this (Almond and Verba, 1936: 7). The definition of "civic culture" is based on the idea of attitude (Allport, 1935), whose internal structure describes a wide range of "mental orientations" of citizens toward society, government and politics, political power, and the state, whereas the idea of "open politics" combines aspects of political economy and democracy theories.

The conceptual and methodological roots of classical political culture theory must be carefully sought in the early developments of social and political research:

1. Political culture in relation to social context and cognitive structure (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Berelson et al., 1954; Campbell et al., 1960; Campbell, 1963).

2. Political culture in relation to the type of political regime (democracy) and the structure (institutional, organizational) and performance of the state (Ellis, 1997; Elazar, 1970).
3. Political culture in relation to democracy, political power, legitimacy, and trust, especially in the literature of former communist societies and new democracies in the eastern half of Europe after the fall of the Iron Curtain: Mishler and Pollack (2003), Mishler and Rose (2001), Rose et al. (1998), Rose (1998), Klingemann and Fuchs (2006).

Elites and Political Culture

Francis explicitly acknowledges the influence of elites on political activity within the state and defines political elites as those who control society (Francis, 2011). Furthermore, Francis's analysis of political elites as members of ruling structures and their affiliated networks is supported by the definition of Pareto, which is cited in Delican's works and views political elites as people who have a direct connection to the ruling structures (Delican, 2000). This demonstrates the link between the actions of political elites and how they influence the political culture that is now in place. According to Francis, the main traits of any society are a reflection of the traits of its political elites, both in terms of political behavior and political culture (Reisinger, 1995). As a result, elites not only hold power but also use it to influence political environments and, in doing so, to mold political culture.

Bove contends that the conduct and attitude of people or the masses toward politics are not always explained by the existence of comparable components in the idea of political culture (Bove, 2002). In order to better comprehend the influence of political actors' actions and tendencies within the political context, Rosenbaum and Almond argue that it is necessary to define the key elements of political culture (Rosenbaum, 1975) (Almond, 1956). Welch also thinks that political culture concentrates on the political results that occur from the actions of political elites, even though it doesn't explain individual behavior (Welch, 2013). Welch highlights that although political culture research has taken a variety of methodologies, scholars generally agree that political culture has an impact on a state's political climate. A crucial component of the overall political system, political culture is defined by Reisinger as a cross-national examination of values within a state (Reisinger, 1995). According to Almond (1956), political culture shows how many facets of culture, such as ethnicity, ideology, and representatives of these subcultures, can affect political conduct at all governmental levels.

The ideals, attitudes, and behavioral patterns of individuals who have an impact on political results are referred to as elite political culture. Thus, elite political culture is shaped by the activities and interests of political elites. This opinion is also supported by Inglehart's political culture research. According to him, political players involved in the political process have created "different systems of values" that are linked to cultural values (Inglehart, 2000).

Furthermore, Camp suggests that the public's perception of the state and their assessment of the effectiveness of political elites are influenced by the ideals of political elites with regard to state authority and governance (Camp, 2001). According to this perspective, the public's response to political outcomes—which stem from the ideals of political elites—is influenced by the elite political culture, which is shaped by the activities of the elite.

Dimensions of Political Culture

Almond initially introduced political culture as an attitude toward politics (Razaghi, 2013). He elaborated the dimensions of this definition and its indicators in his later works.

Almond and Verba define three types of cognitive, emotional, and evaluative orientations, through which patterns of political culture in a society can be identified:

1. **Cognitive orientation**, which is related to the people's knowledge and beliefs about the political system and reflects their understanding of rules, roles, and institutions; that is, it includes all individual knowledge of the political system.
2. **Emotional orientation**, which pertains to people's feelings toward the political system, its rules, roles, and

outputs; in other words, it includes individuals' emotions toward the elements of the political system (Pavone, 2014).

3. **Evaluative orientation**, which includes people's judgments about political goals and consists of value-based, cognitive, and emotional criteria; that is, here, individuals' evaluations of the performance of the political system and its various parts are included (Ghavam, 2009: 73).

To far, researchers and scholars have distinguished between several forms of political culture. As an example, political culture types have been identified by Gabriel Almond (parochial, subject, participatory); Walter Rosenbaum (civil, secular, ideological, homogeneous, fragmented); Daniel Elazar (individualistic, moralistic, traditional); Mahmood Sariohghalam (tribal); Samih Farsoun and Mehrdad Mashayekhi (Islamist, libertarian, and communitarian); and others (Sultan Al-Katabi et al., 2001).

It should be highlighted that each society's political culture is a result of elements that have influenced its citizens' views on politics, governance, power, and political behavior over the course of that nation's political history. The demographic makeup of a country, its history and background, its geographic location, its governing system, its dominant religion and sect, and its geographic and strategic location are all important factors that shape its political culture.

Types of Political Culture

The three types of cognitive, emotional, and evaluative orientations are directed toward four aspects: the system as a whole, inputs, outputs, and the self as a political actor—through which one can identify patterns of political culture in societies (Clark, 2016).

These three orientations toward the four aspects of political life shape individuals' political culture patterns. These four aspects include the system as a whole or political regime, inputs, outputs, and the self as a political actor.

Based on this, Almond and Verba introduce the following patterns of political culture:

1. **Parochial Political Culture:** People in this kind of culture have a poor propensity toward political objectives. People are aware that they have no say in how political objectives are formed or changed; in other words, they do not have a thorough comprehension of political institutions and do not feel a feeling of connection to such institutions. People may play a part in tribal or ethnic decisions in such a culture, but they are unable to apply that influence in the larger national political sphere, and they do not prioritize national interests (Karimi et al., 2006).
2. **Subject Political Culture:** Even if people in this kind of political culture are reasonably aware of and comprehend the nation's political system, they do not actively engage in it. They may be interested in or unhappy with the state of politics, but they are unable to function effectively in the political arena because of the lack of true democracy in society or the frailty of the institutions (Karimi et al., 2006). This kind is reflected in Afghanistan's dominant political culture today. A comparatively high degree of recognition of political institutions, the constitution, and the history of the nation has been observed in recent years as a result of the Afghan people's relative increase in political consciousness. Nevertheless, despite this awareness, many either have little desire to get involved in politics or do not believe that it will be beneficial or successful.
3. **Participatory Political Culture:** In this type of political culture, all segments of society play a fundamental role in the country's policies and government, and they actively participate in political activities with high levels of awareness and understanding (Clark, 2016).

Characteristics of Afghanistan's Political Culture

Religious convictions and tribal norms form the foundation of Afghan society's largely traditional political culture. Afghanistan's political system, which is essentially defined by structural patrimonialism and is influenced by the dominant political culture, has supplanted the economic and logical incentives of the urban

middle class with the political goals of the state's governing party. Afghanistan has always had an authoritarian government, and as a result, social classes, the law, politics, and culture have all changed from what is seen in European history. The rise of egalitarian motives has been thwarted by political authoritarianism. Politicians' use of coercive violence throughout history is indicative of this nation's political culture, which is armed with tools of tyranny. The state has never used persuasion to protect its citizens from political servitude (Azkia & Ghaffari, 2005: 184).

Authoritarianism and violence, political mistrust, xenophobia and animosity toward foreigners, conflict between traditionalists and radical modernists, ethnic and tribal political culture, overpoliticization of the social sphere, dogmatism and absolutism, law evasion, a militant and predatory spirit, and negative individualism are some characteristics of Afghanistan's dominant political culture (Hasanifar & Zarbighalehhamami, 2023).

The political culture of Afghanistan has changed dramatically in the last few decades. The promotion of political involvement has benefited from this change. A rational approach to religion, a softer xenophobia and animosity toward foreigners, a decrease in the conflict between radical modernists and traditionalists, a move away from absolutism and dogmatism toward mutual acceptance and tolerance, a shift from authoritarianism and violence toward democracy and tolerance, and a growing tendency toward adherence to the law are all results of the positive developments of recent years (Sajjadi, 2001).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

One of the qualitative research techniques that is frequently applied in several social science domains is grounded theory. This method is used to investigate, clarify, and formulate ideas on social processes from the viewpoints of people who have dealt with the social problems or phenomena being studied. When little is known about the phenomenon under study, it is very helpful (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Birks & Mills, 2012). Grounded theory is seen as an exploratory, inductive approach that is grounded in reality and provides explanations for events as they happen. Instead of depending on pre-existing or known theories, this approach allows researchers to methodically build hypotheses and propositions based on actual evidence (Bazargan, 2014:80).

This approach involves gathering, identifying, and extracting concepts from the data, after which they are compared and examined in general with other concepts. As a result, related items are grouped together, and the most abstract group creates a category. Then, until theoretical saturation is reached and the concepts match the data, concepts and categories are continuously compared with fresh data (Frost et al., 2010). Grounded theory is the foundation for many traditional qualitative processes, such as data collection, disaggregation, analysis, coding, and memo writing (Charmaz, 2017). Actually, a grounded theory researcher studies people who are involved in similar processes or interactions in order to develop theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2011). Purposive and judgmental sampling were the methods utilized to find study volunteers. Semi-structured interviews with 15 questions, usually lasting 60 to 100 minutes, were used to collect data for this study between January and May 2024 once the required framework for conducting interviews was established and the desired participants were identified. The endpoint for sample size and data collection in this investigation was theoretical saturation. Twenty-five people were interviewed before the sample reached theoretical saturation.

The initial few interviewees were carefully chosen by the researchers using the theoretical sampling method. Following extensive investigation and evaluation, the first three respondents were chosen from among master's degree holders of different racial, religious, and gender backgrounds. Furthermore, attempts were taken to guarantee that these people had a respectable degree of general and political knowledge pertinent to the research's primary topic. Consequently, students from the natural sciences and humanities were the ones chosen. The following participants were chosen once these interviews were analyzed and the extractable topics were comprehended. The researchers noticed a build-up and completion of data from different participants during the interviewing and analysis process, until it became evident that, following the nineteenth interview, no noteworthy new information was being added to the earlier findings, and the data was being repeated repeatedly. Grounded theory approach was used in this study because of the delicate nature of the social setting being studied, the objective of obtaining profound and authentic insights through qualitative research, and the need to identify the conceptual model of the process based on the viewpoints of the participants. Maximum variance

(gender, field of study, and political attitude) and theoretical sampling were employed for participant selection. As a result, students with a wide range of political views, academic backgrounds, and genders were chosen, giving the researchers a wealth of data to build a conceptual model.

The researchers generally chose to use a targeted and specific qualitative approach to address the research problem because of the following limitations: the inability to connect with Afghan citizens living in Turkey, the lack of access to a large statistical population for conducting quantitative research, and the lack of necessary economic infrastructure for collecting large-scale statistical data in this field. With its methodical, methodical, and systematic approach, grounded theory helps researchers to map out a thorough course using information gathered from interviews. This approach offers a framework for elucidating the circumstances and causes of the problem under study.

In this research method, through a repetitive process, concepts were gradually extracted from codes; then, from the concepts, categories were identified, and from the categories, a conceptual model was developed. Therefore, for data analysis, according to Strauss and Corbin's approach, three coding stages were conducted: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

Table 1. Personal Information of the Participants

Code	Age	Gender	Religion	Nation	Place Of Birth	Place Of Residence	Education Degree	Field
1	36	M	Sunni	Nuristani	Nuristan	Afghanistan	Master	Law
2	33	F	Shia	Hazara	Ghazni	Australia	Master	Archaeology
3	29	F	Sunni	Tajik	Baghlan	Australia	Master	Sociology
4	36	M	Sunni	Pashtun	Nangarhar	Afghanistan	Bachelor's degree	Law
5	37	M	Sunni	Pashtun	Koner	Afghanistan	Master	Business and Administration
6	24	F	Sunni	Tajik	Panjshir	Afghanistan	Bachelor's degree	Economy
7	31	M	Sunni	Pashtun	Kabul	Afghanistan	Doctorate	Economy
8	33	M	Sunni	Tajik	Herat	America	Doctorate	Water and Environmental Engineering
9	32	M	Sunni	Tajik	Panjshir	Afghanistan	Bachelor's degree	Sociology
10	29	F	Sunni	Uzbek	Herat	Afghanistan	Master	Civil engineering
11	35	M	Sunni	Tajik	Parwan	Afghanistan	Bachelor's degree	Law
12	40	F	Sunni	Tajik	Panjshir	Afghanistan	Bachelor's degree	Medicine
13	29	M	Shia	Hazara	Kunduz	Iran	Master	Computer Science
14	34	M	Sunni	Tajik	Panjshir	America	Master	Law and International Relations

15	50	M	Sunni	Turkmen	Balkh	Turkey	Bachelor's degree	Business and Administration
16	34	F	Sunni	Tajik	Parwan	Australia	Master	Business and Administration, LAW
17	28	M	Sunni	Pashtun	Kabul	Afghanistan	Master	Economy
18	31	F	Sunni	Tajik	Parwan	Iran	Bachelor's degree	Economy
19	31	M	Sunni	Pashtun	Maydan Wardak	America	Master	Accounting
20	33	F	Sunni	Tajik	Badakhshkan	Afghanistan	Bachelor's degree	Archaeology
21	37	M	Sunni	Imaq	Kunduz	Iran	Doctorate	International Relations
22	29	F	Sunni	Uzbek	Jawzjan	Turkey	Master	Agriculture
23	28	M	Sunni	Uzbek	Jawzjan	Turkey	Master	International Relations
24	29	F	Sunni	Turkmen	Kunduz	Turkey	Doctorate	Economy
25	45	M	Sunni	Turkmen	Balkh	Afghanistan	Master	Economy

FINDINGS

Causal Conditions: The Role of Political Elites in Ethnic, Religious, and Regional Conflicts

Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, a number of Mujahideen organizations, backed by governments like the United States, Britain, Pakistan, Iran, and Arab countries, rebelled against the Soviets on the grounds of protecting their territory and religion. The USSR eventually fell and the nations that were under its colonial control gained their freedom as a result of the Mujahideen's victory over the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was finally compelled to leave Afghanistan in February 1989. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan signaled the start of a conflict that lasted for over 40 years. Leaders like Mullah Mohammad Omar (Pashtun), Ahmad Shah Massoud (Tajik), Abdul Rashid Dostum (Uzbek), Burhanuddin Rabbani (Tajik), Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (Pashtun), Abdul Ali Mazari (Hazara), and several other political elites came to prominence in Afghanistan as a result of this war. For their different tribes and ethnic groupings, these individuals each represented bravery. With the help of other nations, the Taliban took control of Afghanistan for five years under the guise of putting an end to internal conflicts and saving the people after the Soviet defeat. Ethnic and religious conflicts to gain power resulted in civil wars and extensive destruction. Political elites from diverse ethnic and religious groups formed opposition fronts in response to the Taliban's severe policies towards women and its monoethnic, centralized government, and resistance grew throughout different regions. Afghanistan's political landscape shifted with the events of September 11 and the murder of the country's national hero, Ahmad Shah Massoud. Political elites banded together to reclaim control of Afghanistan's future and worked to create a new regime known as the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan because they were stuck in challenging political circumstances and had no choice but to abide by the dictates of foreign nations and intelligence services.

A) Foreign Policies and International Interventions

Participant 1 stated: "The Americans assembled some Mujahideen and other political elites who were abroad and vying for power in a huge hurry to accomplish their objectives, and with a predetermined plan, created a new political system. According to Mohammad Yunus Qanooni, the Mujahideen government's envoy at the Bonn Conference, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah and James Dobbins discussed the appointment of Mr. Karzai as the

interim head of state on the plane from Tashkent to Bagram airport. All Afghan presidents, from Karzai to Ashraf Ghani, were installed by the Americans following the Bonn Conference. With the help of American and foreign forces, they transitioned the country from a democratic system to a centralized, exclusive, monoethnic one that disregarded the aspirations and ideals of the Afghan people."

Participant 2 expressed: "Through the financial and political backing of powerful individuals and elites, several regional nations and global powers have reinforced networks of self-reliant elites. By providing financial support to political, religious, and ethnic organizations, the United States, Pakistan, Iran, and Qatar contributed to the expansion of oligarchic power. Since much of the help was administered through these elites and powerful corporations rather than independent institutions, the United States unwittingly boosted its linked political elites after 2001, particularly through USAID programs involving billions of dollars in aid. Iran attempted to expand its cultural and economic power by providing financial and cultural assistance to specific political and religious organizations, especially in the Herat region of western Afghanistan. Through its ties to the Taliban and some Pashtun leaders, as well as its support of paramilitary groups in border regions, Pakistan was able to keep strong factions reliant on it. Some ethnic-religious networks were strengthened by Qatar and Turkey, primarily through their political and religious influence over specific Sunni communities. As a result, Afghanistan was transformed from a centralized national system into a battlefield for political elites connected to international powers. "

B) The Extensive Role of Elites in Policymaking, Gaining Governmental and Non-Governmental Privileges, and Resource Sharing

Participant 10 said: "In Afghanistan, ethnic and religious elites played a significant role in both politics and the economy, particularly after 2001. These people influenced important choices, democratic procedures, and even peace talks by using their connections, wealth, and power. For instance, they used money and scheming to manipulate elections. There was a lot of fraud and bargains during the elections in 2014 and 2019. Both Ashraf Ghani's and Abdullah's election campaigns depended more on the backing of rich, ethnic political leaders than on popular support. Foreign involvement and behind-the-scenes agreements served as the foundation for the ultimate outcomes. One example is the election-related deal between Ashraf Ghani and Dr. Abdullah, which was mediated by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry without taking the public's will into account. As a result, power transactions, ethnicism, and personal relationships frequently influenced political participation in Afghanistan rather than being founded on democratic principles and fair competition. These organizations' relationships and interests influenced a number of significant decisions. Due to the significant influence of affluent elites in Afghan politics, many democratic institutions no longer function freely and professionally but rather under the sway of influential groups. As a result, many important decisions lost their transparency and accountability, and many political choices were made on the basis of backroom agreements rather than national interests. "

Participant 5 stated: "Using their economic, ethnic, religious, and political clout, political elites have attempted in recent years to manipulate political participation to their advantage. They have altered everything to suit their interests and undermined independent political parties. The effectiveness of governmental and non-governmental activities was diminished by excessive corruption, the abuse of power to take advantage of governmental and non-governmental resources, a disregard for the creation of jobs, and the mismanagement of reconstruction projects by officials and organizations connected to these elites. People avoided political engagement as a result of these actions, which widened the gulf between the country and the government. For instance, there was an extremely low voter turnout for the most recent presidential election, yet even that low turnout was not honored. "

Contextual Conditions: The Role of Political Elites in Political Developments and the Instrumental Use of Ethnic and Religious Values

In Afghanistan, political elites have always been at the center of politics and the main driver of war. As a result, it is impossible to dispute their influence on the political events of the republican era, from its inception until its end. Afghan elites have always been heavily involved in the process of forming states and making political decisions because of their social standing and influence among the general populace. In particular, the appointment and distribution of government positions as well as ties with neighboring nations were the primary concerns of ethnic and religious elites during the republican era. An excellent illustration of these people's

function inside the state machinery is the Bonn Conference of 2001, which brought participating parties and ethnic and religious leaders together and ended Afghanistan's internal conflicts through Western mediation. Its primary goals were to divide power quickly and establish stability right away. The Northern Alliance's leaders had differing opinions about the structure of governance. A few expressed interest in brief encounters with the head of state. Marshal Fahim, for instance, was in favor of a centralized government where the president and vice president had the majority of the authority. Mr. Younus Qanooni, on the other hand, supported a parliamentary-presidential system in which the president and prime minister share authority. Marshal Dostum, as the leader of the Uzbeks, emphasized a federal system, as later noted by Khalilzad in his book "The Envoy."

Because the US government had to take into account some of their demands in order to pursue its objectives in Afghanistan, and because the elites themselves agreed to establish a presidential system based on political interests and promises they had received from Western powers, they actually played a role at the Bonn meeting that was neither positive nor symbolic. As a result, the US depended on elites who had received their education in the West, had specialized, and were conversant in American language and thought processes. Hamid Karzai came to power, and the foundations of the system were planted from the beginning based on the interests of specific groups, not the national interest, and each ethnic group was given a share in the government.

A) Weak Political and Cultural Education of the People

Participant 18 states: "Despite having the chance, political elites did not contribute positively to political education. They sow division and hostility among the populace rather than encouraging a culture of acceptance and tolerance. By claiming rights and privileges for their people through political processes and using the names of race and religion to strengthen their political positions, these elites caused confusion, mistrust, and hostility to spread throughout the nation. "

Participant 19 adds: "Because these elites exploited their ethnic and religious identities to seize power during elections, the abuse of these identities led to widespread mistrust of them. These divisions were also influenced by the national government. The nation descended into widespread instability as a result of the ethnic and identity issues. These actions made it easier for the Taliban to seize control by encouraging cooperation during their second invasion of Afghanistan. "

B) Weakening of Civil Institutions and Citizens' Rights

Participant 6 comments: "One may argue that the media largely upheld their impartiality and independence while also significantly enhancing the public-government relationship. Nonetheless, non-governmental groups were crucial in encouraging corruption abroad. Regretfully, these groups feigned to support the objectives of empowering the Afghan people's economy, but in practice, they were foreigners' agents, acquiring projects and embezzling humanitarian money intended for the Afghan people. Therefore, NGOs have always played a significant role in encouraging corruption, which either directly or indirectly bolstered political leaders by way of these elites. "

Participant 4 states: "Political elites were necessary to carry out the initiatives of civil institutions that fought to protect citizens' rights and were crucial in the reconstruction of the Afghan government. These elites had established powerful networks that governed both internal and external operations, and they had authority over the workers on civil projects. As a result, both official and non-governmental civil and citizen rights organizations' efforts failed in many regions of the nation. For instance, hundreds of fake teachers were registered in the system during Ashraf Ghani's administration due to insufficient control by these organizations of the World Bank-designed teacher payroll system project. "

Intervening Conditions: The Role of Political Elites in Shaping and Changing Political Attitudes of the People

Political elites in both republican and traditional governments have played a significant role in drafting and implementing the constitution. Due to their influence among social classes, they facilitated, promoted, and enforced laws among the people. Through their impact on legal and political institutions, connections with

government officials, and influence on public opinion, they made important decisions regarding legislation. These political elites, who entered Afghan policymaking through ethnic and religious channels, had a prominent role in the process of drafting Afghanistan's constitution. It should be noted that in establishing the foundations of the 2004 constitution, Pashtun leaders held the upper hand for two reasons: First, Pashtuns have held power in Afghanistan for the entirety of its more than 100-year history, with the exception of two brief intervals. Pashtuns primarily identified the country as Pashtun and controlled the constitution-writing process since they mistakenly believed they made up the majority of the population. Second, a group that adhered to this school of thinking and had a history of working with Americans was given the task of crafting the constitution by the United States, which supported the new government.

For instance, the constitution refers to all Afghan nationals as "Afghan," which is widely thought to be the same as Pashtun. Pashto titles were used for all of Afghanistan's national emblems, including the national anthem, academic rankings, military grades, administrative phrases, and national institutions. The 2004 constitution listed all of these under the heading "Preservation of National Terms." Ethnic and religious elites have frequently been able to influence the political views and will of their people in different ways because of their connections to the culture and society in which they were nurtured as well as their knowledge of linguistic, ethnic, racial, and religious traits.

A) Negative Performance of Political Parties and Associations

Participant 16 states: "Elites have played a significant role in institutional corruption, and political parties and their allies have supported every corruption case. Indeed, their corruption has impacted the way laws are implemented both directly and indirectly. Because of their party backing, these elites were frequently not pursued by the law and, when they were, were found not guilty. In certain instances, laws that were adverse to them were not adopted or implemented, while laws that were enacted in accordance with their intentions were. For instance, the statute requiring education for parliamentary candidates and banning foreign citizenship for ministries, members of parliament, and presidential candidates. "

Participant 17 says: " The interests of their particular ethnic groups and tribes were being pursued by the parties that were founded after 2001, rather than the interests of the country and the general people. Therefore, the establishment of political parties in Afghanistan had primarily negative effects and widened ethnic divides rather than fostering political progress. Parties that initially reflect ethnic divisions, as stated by Horowitz, "increase distances and widen divides by creating ethnic appeals for voters and strengthening the influence of rigid ethnic elements." In actuality, democracy—which is defined as administration by the people and their representatives—has evolved into a struggle among ethnic representatives for the greatest amount of power and privileges in Afghanistan today. The ethnicization of politics and the politicization of ethnicity will result in disputes that are difficult to end or reverse. "

B) Media and Public Opinion – The Role of Civil Institutions and NGOs

Participant 8 states: "Ethnic and religious elites approached the media in two ways: either they threatened it or they bought it. Some media owners used these outlets as propaganda weapons because they were party leaders or under the direction of political elites. For instance, Atta Mohammad Noor and Mohib's TV networks primarily served their owners' political agendas since they were able to build networks of influence within government institutions and garner popular support by influencing public opinion. A few television networks advertised government policies. NGOs and certain independent media, however, were crucial in bringing corruption and oligarchic influence to light. By exposing corruption and financial abuses, independent journalists and reporters—particularly those from TOLO and Ariana TV, which exposed corruption cases in Kabul during Hamid Karzai's administration—sought to increase public awareness and fortify transparency. But they frequently encountered grave dangers. For instance, there were numerous attacks on journalists in Afghanistan in 2016, many of whom reported on sensitive topics like corruption. Because of the intense pressure from some political elites, media voices were frequently muffled. Yama Siawash, a TOLO TV journalist who was killed in an enigmatic explosion, serves as another illustration. According to some sources, his recent revelations about corruption at Da Afghanistan Bank were the reason behind his passing. Some of these groups and media were funded by nearby nations and frequently promoted other cultures. "

Participant 7 remarks: "In this sense, there should be two categories for NGOs and the media: 1) Media connected to oligarchies both internal and external: These media had a detrimental effect on Afghanistan because of their connections to oligarchies, which benefited the government and political elites. They took this action for a variety of reasons, including financial difficulties or the endorsement of powerful political figures. 2) Positively contributing media, non-governmental organizations, and civil institutions that made a concerted effort to expose government corruption and the real faces of ethnic and religious leaders. "

Strategies: Cultural Conflicts and Continuities in Perceptions of Legitimacy and Political Order

Due to pervasive corruption and rent-seeking, the Afghan government's total reliance on foreign aid, and external players' meddling in numerous areas, its performance over the past 20 years has been deplorable and humiliating. In addition to impeding Afghanistan's progress and development, this also exposed the nation to a host of other difficulties. Ineffective policies and, of course, the authoritarianism of political elites over the past 20 years have resulted in poverty, insecurity, moral and administrative corruption, unemployment, inflation, educational inequality, and more. Additionally, one of the primary causes of Afghanistan's culturally diverse society's discontent has been severe ethnonationalism. It is evident that the public's mistrust of state institutions and the government's lack of popular support caused by these elites' subpar performance over the years have resulted in public despair and, eventually, feelings of hatred and rejection toward the government, its policies, and its executors.

A) Pride and Honor in Afghanistan's History and Constitution, and Hatred toward Elites

Participant 20 states: "Afghanistan has a long history of ethnic and religious bases, which are reflected in its political processes. Afghan society is proud of its rich history and culture, as well as its resistance and battles against invaders. Although people have always respected and complied with their constitution, political elites have broken the law to further their own agendas."

Participant 12 explains: " Many jihadi, religious, and business groups, as well as dual-citizens, entered the Afghan governance system following the initial phase of the Taliban's downfall and the installation of the new government. Some of them entered the political system as wealthy individuals, some as educated people, and some as members of ethnic elites. People hoped for their overthrow because of their egregious injustices and inequity. "

B) Reproduction or Resistance to Authoritarian and Non-participatory Political Culture

Participant 15 says: "They worked with the government when their interests were served, but they fought

and erected barriers whenever government programs benefited the general populace. When members of ethnic and religious elites or their associates broke the law, they stopped the law from being enforced and punished. These elites, particularly ethnic elites, were primarily responsible for the pervasive unfairness and prejudice that occurred during the Republican era."

Participant 11 states: "Because civil society organizations promoted justice, transparency, and people's rights, which endangered the interests of the political elites, some of them saw them as competitors. Civil society was therefore subject to threats and pressures from the political and economic spheres, which restricted their ability to act freely and made them strike a balance between their independence and their ties to powerful organizations. These elites have weakened the effectiveness, openness, and fairness of governmental institutions during the last 20 years. Because of this effect, interactions between the government and its citizens are now more centered on political, ethnic, and personal ties than on justice and the rule of law. Many people had to pay bribes or seek support from powerful networks to access government services. "

C) Use of Traditional or Religious Discourses to Legitimize Power

Participant 7 says: "The largest betrayal of Afghanistan's democratic government was the deal reached at the Loya Jirga between the United States and the Afghan government. The US and its allies disregarded

Afghanistan's military, ethnic groups, and organizational structure prior to signing the deal. They merely took a theoretical approach to the situation, asserting that they had made peace with the Afghan people and ethnic leaders and promised them protection. However, the reality was different behind the scenes. The public benefited nothing from these old religious discourses other than the legitimization of their own authority. "

Participant 21 states: "The largest army and police forces were established in Afghanistan, according to the security structure, but the security pact that the National Unity Government and the US signed and that the Loya Jirga authorized merely served to legitimize their political actions. Furthermore, Ashraf Ghani's call for the Loya Jirga to free Taliban prisoners was merely a formality meant to keep the president and his inner circle in power. It is important to emphasize that the majority of persons invited to these discussions are those with close ties to these political elites, who have always utilized them as a means of justifying their nefarious activities. "

Consequences: Structural Transformations at the Macro Level and the Marginalization of Ethnic and Religious Minorities, Especially Women, Due to the Actions of Political Elites

Macro structural changes, particularly in the political, economic, and social domains, invariably have profound effects on how power and resources are distributed in society. Even though these changes can promote progress and growth, they have frequently resulted in the strengthening of social divisions and the perpetuation of inequality. The marginalization of individuals that were already in unequal positions—such as women and members of ethnic and religious minorities—is one unfavorable effect of these changes. As the primary planners and implementers of macrostructures, political elites have a significant influence on how these changes are shaped. These elites contribute to the perpetuation of inequality in many systems by concentrating power in the hands of particular groups and disregarding the demands of minorities. This process not only threatens social cohesion but also creates grounds for political dissatisfaction, civil protests, and widespread distrust toward the ruling structure. Among these, structural discrimination disproportionately affects women from ethnic and religious minorities. They face not only limitations stemming from their ethnic and religious identities but also compounded discrimination due to their gender. Lack of access to equal opportunities in education, employment, political participation, and decision-making are among the consequences of policies in which the voices of these groups are unheard or ignored. To remedy this situation, political elites must move away from exclusive and centralized frameworks toward structures that guarantee diversity, social justice, and genuine participation of all social groups. Only through inclusive and conscious policymaking can there be hope that macro-structures become facilitators of justice, equality, and peaceful coexistence rather than mechanisms of exclusion.

A) Inefficiency of Democracy in Afghanistan Due to Weak Administrative and Social Structures

Participant 25 says: "After the fall of the Taliban regime and the extensive presence of the international community, led by the United States, in 2001, Afghanistan experienced a democratic transition. Despite the infancy of democracy in this country, three rounds of presidential and parliamentary elections were held. Despite the challenges and failures recognized as components of Afghanistan's democratic transition, Afghans risked their lives to go to the polls and practice democracy. However, the political elites of Afghanistan, together with their international partners, ignored all these sacrifices. Unfortunately, today this democracy is on the path to failure with no one taking responsibility or providing satisfactory answers. After twenty years of the US and allies' presence, democracy failed, and the Taliban once again seized power."

Participant 22 expresses: "One of the elements of democracy is the free election of their leaders, but in Afghanistan's four election cycles, foreign interference was present, which itself violates democracy. It was evident that Afghan presidents and parliamentary candidates systematically gained power based on relationships with foreign countries and money. These practices indicate weak administrative and social structures and the inefficiency of democracy in a country with ethnic and tribal culture."

B) Dependency, Ethnic Favoritism, and Corruption in Government Leading to the Taliban's Resurgence

Participant 13 says: "Structural corruption had a direct and indirect negative impact. For example, those appointed in customs were obliged to send thousands of dollars monthly or even daily to the address of their supporters who appointed them and collect these sums. Customs were controlled by influential individuals; some

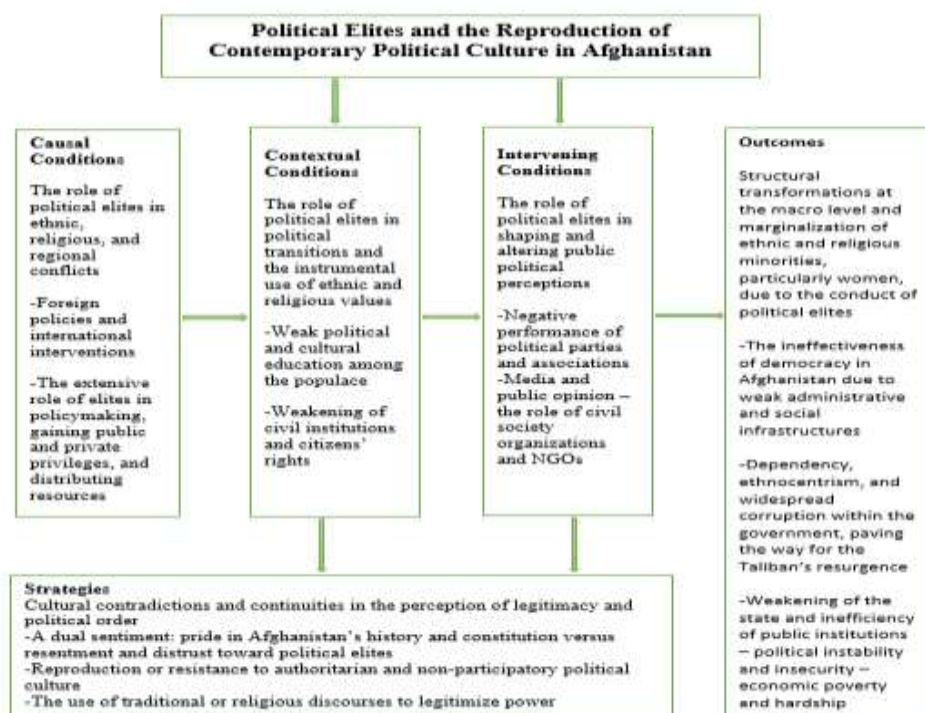
operated officially or unofficially to collect money and resources and send them to their patrons. This caused widespread corruption and played a major role in weakening government structures. Even the smallest government positions were sold directly or indirectly. We have witnessed this many times, and it severely affected administrative structures and caused widespread corruption. We observed these issues in social justice and social capital indicators, which caused the collapse of governmental institutions, destroyed healthy relations, eroded trust, and severely affected both quantitative and qualitative aspects. "

Participant 9 states: "Ethnic elites had presence in all government departments and had created very strong networks from executive to judicial and supervisory institutions. These individuals encouraged corruption among the people. For example, then-President Hamid Karzai publicly said, 'Corrupt but don't take it abroad.' This shows how much elites contributed to institutionalizing corruption. They also dominated supervisory and judicial institutions, so no action was taken against corruption and injustice. They controlled everything. Based on their political power, these elites always placed uneducated and unprofessional people in government institutions, leading to the collapse of state structures. Since the oligarchs were from different ethnic groups with many political conflicts among themselves, coordination between government institutions declined drastically, causing widespread corruption. "

C) Weakening of the State, Inefficiency of Government Institutions — Insecurity and Political Instability — Poverty and Economic Problems

Participant 24 says: "These ethnic elites obstructed social justice, and as major violators of social justice in the past and the mentioned period, social welfare was distributed among their own supportive groups, and people outside their circles mostly did not benefit from these provisions and aid. The process adopted by elites during Ashraf Ghani's time to gain women's votes pushed women's society toward corruption and immorality, with many cases of women's exploitation and sexual corruption in the presidential palace. "

Participant 40 states: "Corruption and the disruption of social justice by political elites caused widespread poverty and economic problems in the country. Political opposition groups exploited this economic hardship of the people and used them against the government, causing insecurity in regions and cities. This process led many people and some political elites to become dissatisfied with the government, creating conditions for the Taliban's return to power. This regime change caused many ongoing disorders in Afghanistan, extinguishing the hopes of half of the Afghan population. "



DISCUSSION

A society's political culture is influenced by its elite structure. Furthermore, the elites of any community decide or change its objectives. Broadly speaking, these elites comprise elected officials, activists, and political figures who formally or unofficially contribute to the creation, development, and execution of the political system's policies. In essence, elite interaction produces effective policymaking and governance. To ensure that each political elite functions within the context of a larger whole, executive elites must exhibit the requisite tolerance for utilizing a variety of forces at different societal levels. Though this relies on how a society's leaders and elites wish to run the nation, the governing class has the main duty for fostering understanding and balance. As a result, the problem is associated with the rulers' character, disposition, and intellectual underpinnings, as well as the social, political, and even constitutional background of that country. The need for critical engagement, comprehension, and controlled intellectual conflict in political conduct must be embraced by elites. Political maturity is a prerequisite for achieving this commitment, yet political maturity does not develop overnight. Political infancy is a necessary step toward political maturity in a mature society. Elites must first attain a certain level of political maturity in order to support and provide the foundation for a mature society by recognizing and differentiating between immature and mature societies. In order to achieve efficiency, desirability, development, and innovation, a mature society takes the values of inquiry, critique, interaction, and understanding very seriously and works to strengthen them.

Building the future requires political maturity and courage among the elites who can represent the entire society, as Afghan society is a nation in transition and many issues are entwined with political matters. Elites have two ways of influencing the historical and social acts of their society: by setting an example and making decisions. Political elites make decisions based on their social and political actions. Because of their influence and authority, they can either help or hinder the development of the variables that drive political advancement. Creating or strengthening values is a component of role-modeling, which is closely connected to the social and political conduct of elites. By institutionalizing the elements and drivers of progress in their own behavior as suitable models, they can exert influence and help the general public institutionalize these elements.

Afghanistan's political elites have always been concerned about advancement and growth since the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan's political system was established. The elites are in charge of structural change because Afghan society is typically weak and underdeveloped. It has been noted, meanwhile, that these elites have not been successful in following this route. Instead of removing many of the country's growth barriers, their ideas and actions have made already difficult situations worse. The role of elites as the most significant players in the development process is assessed in this section. The focus on elites' roles stems from the fact that, historically, elites have dominated politics due to the economic might of state institutions and the frailty of civil society. Elites have been unable to participate in significant political, social, and cultural changes during the Islamic Republic era due to elements including an uneven political and economic state structure. Despite this, their political culture still plays a significant influence.

Similar to how people vary in their morals, behaviors, and temperaments, political culture may likewise be used to understand and explain the differences and distinctions across political entities. It is crucial to remember that political culture is the collective history and practices that have shaped social structures, educational and training systems, families, and the attitudes and behaviors of leaders and elites within a political, economic, and social system over an extended period of time.

It also takes a fair amount of time to alter and change the political socialization processes. As a result, political culture cannot be swiftly altered by implementing scientific methods, unlike economic development. Since wealth is simpler to amass than authority to distribute, political rationality's domination is significantly more intricate and challenging than economic rationality. Tolerance, self-control, long-term planning, and the importance of process are all necessary for political rationality. In order to accomplish national objectives, political development also necessitates the adoption of political logic with a democratic approach through legality, competitive procedures, trust, coordination, and social cohesion. This is true of Afghan society and culture as well. There is a strong correlation between Afghanistan's underdevelopment and a negative political culture, according to field research and empirical data. There are clear signs of insecurity, self-centeredness,

opportunism, pessimism, selfishness, and allegiance to people rather than the nation and its resources. Following the Bonn Conference, Afghanistan's developments were significantly influenced by the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, which displayed even more detrimental impacts. The study's research and historical analysis show that the elites in charge of Afghanistan's political, economic, and social processes lack the political socialization and infrastructure needed to promote sustainable growth. The dominant political culture has historically been based on ethnocentrism, nepotism, a sense of group affiliation, hatred rather than tolerance, political accommodation, and the need to survive via violence and plunder.

CONCLUSION

The results of this research suggest that Afghanistan's political culture is largely influenced by the actions, choices, and perspectives of ethnic and religious political leaders. According to Almond and Verba's political culture theory, political culture includes cognitive, emotional, and evaluative orientations toward the political system, which are ingrained in citizens through political socialization. In Afghanistan, due to the frailty of civil institutions, a history of political authoritarianism, and tribal frameworks, this socialization has not emerged from grassroots levels but has been predominantly molded by political elites. Consequently, the conduct and viewpoints of these elites have directly influenced the development and transformation of the political culture within society. The study's findings reveal that Afghanistan's political elites, particularly in the period following the Islamic Republic, have not only hindered political development but have also exacerbated political, social, and cultural divisions by perpetuating ethnic, monopolistic, and opportunistic behaviors. This scenario corresponds with the pattern of a parochial or even limited political culture, as outlined by Almond and Verba, where citizens have some political awareness but lack a sense of effective engagement in the political system.

A comparative examination of the results, alongside theoretical insights from scholars like Inglehart, Camp, and Francis, reveals that the values and actions of elites impact not only political performance but also the public's perceptions and expectations of governance. This influence has at times hindered positive changes in political culture and, at other times, reinforced negative characteristics such as ethnocentrism, political distrust, violence, and lawlessness. Moreover, the findings highlight that the absence of political rationality among political elites—characterized by a lack of tolerance, moderation, long-term planning, and a focus on processes—has significantly impeded the political and cultural progress of the country. Contrary to Welch's assertion that political culture affects the quality of elite performance, in Afghanistan, the performance of elites has itself been a factor in shaping and entrenching a negative and unproductive political culture. In conclusion, this study indicates that reforming Afghanistan's political culture is unattainable without reshaping the attitudes, values, and behavioral patterns of political elites. Additionally, transforming political culture in societies like Afghanistan necessitates a gradual shift from political immaturity to political maturity—a transition that elites, as key players, must initiate themselves.

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