

**Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan**, by Dipali Mukhopadhyay. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 388 pp., \$ 88.12 hardcover

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While recent research on subnational authoritarianism has presented conflicting theories on the emergence of local strongmen (see, for instance, [Gibson 2012](#) and [Sidel 2014](#)), most accounts share the notion that the presence of such figures undermines the capacity of the national government to rule effectively ([Moncada and Snyder 2011](#)).

Dipali Mukhopadhyay's book on warlords and strongman governors in Afghanistan presents evidence to the contrary. Usually seen as a state where a weak national government struggles to domesticate an unruly periphery ([Taylor and Botea 2008](#)) and where the presence of local strongmen has turned the centralized institutional hierarchy established under the 2004 constitution into an "informal federation" ([Brick Murtaashvili 2014](#), 325), Afghanistan shows that warlords are willing to work on behalf of the national government under certain circumstances. Concretely, the presence of two conditions makes it likely that strongmen transition into what the author calls "strongman governors." One, if a warlord faces strong local competition from other warlords, he is inclined to enter an alliance with the central government because the unique access to resources he receives as an ally of the national government will give him an advantage over his local competitors. Two, a local strongman needs to have enough informal local authority in his province to rule on behalf of the national government because in Afghanistan the formal "institutional scaffolding needed to support a robust police force, tax collection...or the provision of health and education [is] severely anemic or entirely absent" (p. 49).

If either of these two conditions is absent, strongmen are unlikely to morph into strongman governors. Instead, if a strongman faces no local competition, he will likely remain a local warlord who pursues a political agenda that is detached at best and in conflict at worst with the interests of the national government. On the other hand, if a strongman does not have enough capacity to control the locality he is supposed to oversee on behalf of the national government, he may simply remain a government appointee without the capacity to enforce central government interests on the ground. In short, the relative local strength of a strongman plays a crucial role in Afghanistan's state formation process.

Mukhopadhyay compares four provinces to test her argument. Her main case studies are Balkh and Nangarhar, two provinces that came under the effective authority of strongman

governors in recent years. Soon after the 2001 U.S.-led attacks against the Taliban, Atta Mohammad Noor and Abdur Rashid Dostum, two warlords who have been present in regional politics for decades, began to compete for control over Balkh province. In his fight against Dostum, Atta relied on thousands of loyal militiamen, customs revenues from cross-border trade with Uzbekistan, his reputation as a committed *mujahideen* during the Soviet occupation, as well as ties to important local ethnic groups. However, Atta also tried to amplify these resources by establishing alliances with the government in Kabul as early as spring 2003. A year later, President Karzai appointed Atta as governor of Balkh province. In subsequent years, Atta used his new linkages with the center and the formal and informal powers that came with it to expand his control over the local coercive apparatus, the local economy and networks of local notables, thereby strengthening his position vis-à-vis local competitors such as Dostum. At the same time, however, Atta also enforced central government interests. Not only did he improve the local security situation but Atta also turned the provincial economy free from poppy cultivations as part of the central government's counternarcotics campaign. Arguably, the most important indicator for Atta's upward deference was his willingness to remit sizeable sums of local revenues to the Finance Ministry in Kabul.

A strongman governor also emerged in Nangarhar province at the border to Pakistan in the person of Gul Agha Sherzai. Rotated in by the central government in 2005 from Kandahar province after Sherzai had become too threatening to the interests of the Kandahari Karzai clan while governor there, he was an outsider in Nangarhar with no local power base to speak of. Consequently, he had to rely on his alliances with the center to establish himself locally. Like Atta in Balkh province, Sherzai used the capacities that arose from being aligned with the central government to concentrate coercive power in the province and to dominate the local private sector as well as to establish linkages to locally influential tribesmen. At the same time, he also defended central government agendas such as the ban on poppy cultivation. In addition, he improved the security situation in the province and transferred customs revenues from Torkham Gate, one of the most lucrative border crossings between Afghanistan and Pakistan, to the Ministry of Finance.

Mukhopadhyay then juxtaposes the two cases of strongman governorship in Balkh and Nangarhar province with the reign of Ismail Khan in Herat province and Juma Khan Hamdard who served in Baghlan and Jowizjan provinces. In Herat, warlord Ismail Khan did not face any significant local competition when he was appointed as governor in 2001 due to his military history in the province dating back decades, and his success in exploiting the rivalries between the United States and Iran over influence in that part of Northern Afghanistan to seek rents for himself. With threats from local rivals absent, Ismail Khan had nothing to gain from forging closer alliances with the central government. Consequently, Herat province at the Iranian border became a feudal statelet under the rule of Ismail Khan that was largely detached from national government interests, Mukhopadhyay shows. Khan, for instance, refused to transfer local revenues to the central government until he was dismissed in 2004. In contrast, Juma Khan Hamdard was too weak a warlord to rule on behalf of the central government in Baghlan and Jowizjan provinces to which he was appointed. Eventually, Hamdan amounted to never more than a "proxy" for the central government who was sent to different provinces because he was "willing and capable of disrupting the equilibrium" between local strongmen to the advantage of the central government (p. 314).

In short, Mukhopadhyay's account of local politics in Afghanistan after 2001 provides convincing evidence that the exchange between the state and local strongmen may not

always undermine state capacity but can indeed be a constructive process. Warlords that are “just strong enough” (p. 50) will very likely become strongman governors. While formal state building of the kind pushed by development agencies and foreign governments may have been undermined, the influence of the center in local politics has increased due to the presence of strongman governors.

At the same time, it would have been interesting to learn more about the sustainability of the state formation that occurs in this fashion. The author emphasizes that strongman governance constitutes an unstable equilibrium due to the fact that state formation in Afghanistan is essentially built around individuals. Said differently, strongman governorship has not institutionalized mechanisms of governing.

How, then, will a turnover of individuals that constitute the current fragile political order shape strongman governorship in the years to come? Mukhopadhyay believes that strongman governors are likely to shape politics in the future too as local competition and informal power, the two conditions necessary for strongman governors to arise, remain present in 2014. However, strongman governors do not exist only because of the presence of local competition and informal power but also because the central government offers such figures resources the latter deem useful in their fights against local rivals. How will strongman governors relate to a newly elected Afghan president who will have increasingly less to offer to local strongman governors in terms of capital and coercion as a consequence of the withdrawal of donor agencies and foreign troops after 2014?

At the same time, it would have been interesting to learn more about the relationship of these strongman governors with the local population. Mukhopadhyay shows that effective strongman governor rule does not necessarily translate into legitimacy among the local population. In this context, what conditions might force strongman governors to cooperate more with local citizens?<sup>1</sup> The book does not explore strongman governors’ downward linkages and relations to local populations in as systematic a fashion as it examines their relationship to Kabul. Recent research on local politics in Afghanistan has emphasized the relatively minuscule role *direct* warlord governance plays in day-to-day affairs of citizens and has described, instead, a complex interplay between members of the local state such as district governors (*woluswals*) and representatives of customary organizations such as community-selected village representatives (*maliks*) in the delivery of services to citizens (Brick Murtazashvili 2014, 326).

Brick Murtazashvili argues that service delivery through community organizations is poor where the relationship between district governors and *maliks* became strained, “usually because *woluswals* were unconstrained” and therefore abused their powers (Brick Murtazashvili 2014, 338). As the district governors are partly under the control of provincial governors, the book could have explored more how strongman governors related to *woluswals* in their efforts to deliver governance on behalf of Kabul. Finally, the book also does not say much about possible variance in governance *within* provinces under the authority of strongman governors. Again, recent research points to considerable differences regarding the delivery of services within provinces as a result of feuds between provincial and district governments (Brick Murtazashvili 2014, 337).

Overall, authors such as Olivier Roy have already made the argument that the presence of local strongmen and warlords may strengthen rather than undermine processes of state formation in Afghanistan (Roy 1995, 109), as have scholars working on parts of the world as diverse as Africa (Reno 1998, 29–30) and Southeast Asia (Sidel 1999, 146). Mukhopadhyay’s book complements and expands such earlier accounts by examining in a comparative

fashion and in great detail the upward orientation of local strongmen and the mechanisms through which relations between the center and the periphery are forged to the benefit of local and national level politicians. Mukhopadhyay's account also offers a glimpse at how the process of state formation in Afghanistan may unfold in coming years, which makes her book an important and interesting read for academics and practitioners alike.

## Note

- 1 See, for instance, [Andersson and Van Laerhoven \(2007\)](#) for an example from South America.

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