

Afghanistan's Corruption Was Made in America

How Self-Dealing Elites Failed in Both Countries

By Sarah Chayes

In 2005, I visited a branch of Afghanistan's national bank in Kandahar to make a deposit. I was launching a cooperative that would craft skin-care products for export, using oils extracted from local almonds and apricot kernels and fragrant botanicals gathered from the desert or the stony hills north of town. In order to register with the authorities and be able to operate legally, we had to make a deposit in the national bank.

The cooperative's chief financial officer, an Afghan, had been trying to achieve this formality for the past nine months—without paying a bribe. I had agreed to accompany him this time, knowing that together we would fare better. (I'm withholding his name because until a few weeks ago, he was a minister in the Afghan government and his family is now a target for retaliation by the Taliban, as are all Afghans who refuse to transfer their allegiance from the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to the newly declared Islamic Emirate.)

"Come back tomorrow," barked the clerk, with a toss of his head, just as clerks had been telling my colleague for the past nine months. The subtext was clear: "Come back tomorrow—with the money."

Abruptly, I found myself on top of the clerk's desk, sitting cross-legged amid all the documents and paperwork. "Fine," I told him. "Take as long as you want. But I'm staying right here until you complete our forms." Eyes wide, the clerk got to work.

This is how life was for Afghans on the United States' watch. Almost every interaction with a government official, including teachers and doctors, involved extortion. And most Afghans weren't able to take the risk I took in making a scene. They would have landed in jail. Instead, they just paid—and their hearts took the blows.

"The police are supposed to be upholding the law," complained another cooperative member a few years later, a former police officer himself. "And they're the ones breaking the law." These officials—the police and the clerks—did not extort people politely. Afghans paid not just in cash but also in a far more valuable commodity: their dignity.

In the wake of the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan, the Taliban's swift reconquest of the country, and the chaotic, bloody exodus that has followed, U.S. officials have lamented that the Afghans failed to put up a fight. But how did the Americans ever expect Afghans to keep risking their lives on behalf of a government that had abused them—with Washington's permission—for decades?

There is also another, deeper truth to grasp. The disaster in Afghanistan—and the United States' complicity in allowing corruption to cripple the Afghan state and make it loathsome to its own people—is not only a failure of U.S. foreign policymaking. It is also a mirror, reflecting back a more florid version of the type of corruption that has long been undermining American democracy, as well.

ON THE TAKE

Corruption in U.S.-occupied Afghanistan wasn't just a matter of constant street-level shakedowns. It was a system. No cops or customs agents got to put all their illicit gains in their own pockets. Some of that money flowed upward, in trickles that joined to form a mighty river of cash. Two surveys conducted in 2010 estimated the total amount paid in bribes each year in Afghanistan at between \$2 billion and \$5 billion—an amount equal to at least 13 percent of the country's GDP. In return for the kickbacks, officials at the top sent protection back down the line.

The networks that ran Afghanistan were flexible and dynamic, beset by internal rivalries as well as alliances. They spanned what Westerners often misperceive as an impermeable wall between the public sector and the supposedly private businesspeople and heads of local “nonprofits” who corralled most of the international assistance that found its way to Afghanistan. These networks often operated like diversified family businesses: the nephew of a provincial governor would get a major reconstruction contract, the son of the governor's brother-in-law would get a plum job as an interpreter for U.S. officials, and the governor's cousin would drive opium shipments to the Iranian border. All three were ultimately part of the same enterprise.

Westerners often scratched their heads at the persistent lack of capacity in Afghan governing institutions. But the sophisticated networks controlling those institutions never intended to govern. Their objective was self-enrichment. And at that task, they proved spectacularly successful.

The errors that enabled this kind of government to take hold date back to the very beginning of the U.S.-led intervention, when American forces armed rag-tag proxy militias to serve as ersatz ground troops in the fight against the Taliban. The militias received spiffy new battle fatigues and automatic rifles but no training or oversight. In recent weeks, pictures of Taliban fighters wielding batons against desperate crowds at the airport in Kabul have horrified the world. But in the summer of 2002, similar scenes took place, with little subsequent outrage, when U.S.-backed militias set up checkpoints around Kandahar and smacked around ordinary Afghans who refused to pay bribes. Truck drivers, families on their way to weddings, and even kids on bikes got a taste of those batons.

In time, U.S. military intelligence officers figured out how to map the social networks of small-time Taliban commanders. But they never explored the links between local officials and the heads of construction or logistics companies that got to bid on U.S.-funded contracts. No one was comparing the actual quality of raw materials used with what was marked down in the budget. We Americans had no idea who we were dealing with.

Ordinary Afghans, on the other hand, could see who was getting rich. They noticed whose villages received the most lavish development projects. And Western civilian and military officials bolstered the standing of corrupt Afghan officials by partnering with them ostentatiously and unconditionally. They stood by their sides at ribbon cuttings and consulted them on military tactics. Those Afghan officials could then credibly threaten to call down a U.S. raid or an airstrike on anyone who got out of line.

SOMETHING ROTTEN

By 2007, many people, myself included, were urgently warning senior U.S. and European officials that this approach was undermining the effort to rebuild Afghanistan. In 2009, in my

capacity as special adviser to the commander of international troops in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, I helped establish an anticorruption task force at the headquarters of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). (McChrystal's successor, David Petraeus, expanded the group and rebranded it as Task Force Shafafiyat.) The original team put together detailed plans for addressing corruption at a regional level throughout the country.

Later, I helped develop a more systematic approach, which would have made the fight against corruption a central element of the overall NATO campaign. Intelligence units would have mapped the social networks of ministers and governors and their connections. International military and civilian officials in Kabul would have applied a graduated range of sanctions to Afghan officials whose corruption was most seriously undermining NATO operations and Afghans' faith in their government. And Afghan military commanders caught stealing materiel or their troops' monthly pay would have been deprived of U.S. support. Later, while serving as special assistant to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, I proposed a series of steps that would have taken particular aim at Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who had intervened to protect corrupt officials who had come under scrutiny, and whose brothers were salting away millions of stolen dollars in Dubai—some of it, we suspected, in trust for Karzai himself.

None of those plans was ever implemented. I responded to request after request from Petraeus until I realized that he had no intention of acting on my recommendations; it was just make-work. The principals' committee of the National Security Council—a group that includes every cabinet-level foreign policy and security official—agreed to consider an alternative approach, but the plan we sent over died in the offices of President Barack Obama's national security advisers James Jones and Tom Donilon. Task Force Shafafiyat continued operating, but it served essentially as window-dressing to be displayed when members of Congress visited as proof that the United States was really trying to do something about Afghan corruption.

ISAF and the U.S. embassy in Kabul had also formed a more specialized task force, the Afghan Threat Finance Cell, to carry out financial investigations. In 2010, it launched its first significant anticorruption probe. The trail led to Karzai's inner circle, and police detained Muhammad Zia Salehi, a senior aide. With a single phone call to corrections officials, however, Karzai got the suspect released. Karzai then demoted all of the Afghan government's anticorruption prosecutors, some of whom had assisted in the ATFC's investigation, cutting their salaries by about 80 percent and barring U.S. Department of Justice officials from mentoring them. No protest came from Washington. "The cockroaches went scuttling for the corners," as a member of the ATFC's leadership described it.

Civilian officials at the Pentagon and their counterparts at the U.S. Department of State and in the intelligence agencies had long dismissed corruption as a significant factor in the U.S. mission in Afghanistan. Many subscribed to the belief that corruption was just part of Afghan culture—as if anyone willingly accepts being humiliated and robbed by government officials. In more than a decade of working to expose and fight corruption in Afghanistan, I was never told by a single Afghan, "We don't really mind corruption; it's part of our culture." Such comments about Afghanistan invariably came only from Westerners. Other U.S. officials contended that petty corruption was so common that Afghans simply took it for granted and that high-level corruption was too politically charged to confront. To Afghans, the explanation was simpler. "America must want the corruption," I remember my cooperative's chief financial officer remarking.

The precedent for Karzai's impunity had been established in the wake of the Afghan presidential election of 2009. Karzai had brazenly stolen it by declaring some Taliban-infested districts safe for voting and then negotiating with the Taliban to allow for the entry and exit of ballot boxes—but not to allow voters free access to polling stations. The result was empty ballot boxes that could then be stuffed. Afghan friends regaled me with descriptions of poll workers they had observed in rural villages firing their guns in the air while on the phone to officials in Kabul. “We’re having a tough time here,” the election officials would shout into the phone. “Can you give us a few more days to get the boxes to you?” Then they would go back to filling out fraudulent ballots.

In some cases, UN investigators who opened sealed boxes found intact pads of ballots inside, all filled out in the same ink. But Washington declined to call for a new election. Instead, the Obama administration dispatched John Kerry, the Democratic senator from Massachusetts who was then chair of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, to try to reason with Karzai. In the end, the official results emerged from a negotiation: Karzai would still win but by fewer votes. That, ultimately, was the type of democracy that Americans cultivated in Afghanistan: one where the rules are rewritten on the fly by those who amass the most money and power and where elections are settled not at the ballot box but by those who already hold office.

THERE WAS ANOTHER WAY

How did U.S. officials across four administrations get Afghanistan so wrong? As in any complex phenomenon, many factors played a role.

First, despite the high costs, the U.S. war was always a halfhearted effort. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, U.S. President George W. Bush's top advisers were obsessed with Iraq; they grudgingly set their sights on Afghanistan only when irrefutable intelligence made clear that the attacks had been carried out by al Qaeda. The organization was then based in Afghanistan, where Osama bin Laden had long-standing partnerships with local jihadis. And yet within a few months of the collapse of the Taliban regime, U.S. diplomats and the military brass had orders to swivel to Iraq. The United States put itself in the impossible position of trying to prosecute two complex wars at once.

For his part, Obama always exuded ambivalence about the mission in Afghanistan. As vice president, Joe Biden was outspoken about his opposition to the intervention. President Donald Trump oversaw the negotiations that forced the Afghan government to make concession after concession to the Taliban so that U.S. forces could leave—and set up the Taliban for their lightning victory. And Biden, back in the White House as president, was at last able to bring about the withdrawal that he wanted 12 years ago. But today is not 12 years ago.

Throughout all four administrations, U.S. officials never met ordinary people in settings that would have made those people feel safe to speak freely. So the Americans never absorbed critical information that was obvious to Afghans, such as the prevalence of corruption and the disgust it was generating. Meanwhile, Karzai knew how to get Afghanistan into the headlines—something that none of the four presidents who oversaw the war wanted. Even out of office, Karzai seems able to outfox the White House: witness his reported role in paving the way for the humiliating denouement of the U.S. war effort by negotiating with regional strongmen and Pakistani officials (or their proxies) to smooth the Taliban takeover.

The United States could have and should have taken a different approach. It should have stood firm in the face of Karzai's temper tantrums, leveraging the fact that Afghan leaders needed Washington far more than Washington needed them. It should have made U.S. assistance, civilian as well as military, conditional on the integrity of the officials receiving the support. The United States should have supplied as many mentors for Afghan mayors and health department heads as it did for colonels and captains in the Afghan National Army. And it should have ensured that entry-level salaries for Afghan civil servants and security forces were sufficient to keep their families clothed and fed, so that clerks and police officers couldn't use the excuse of low pay to legitimize their pilfering. The ISAF and Western embassies could have set up tip lines and ombudsman committees, such as the one the Taliban set up in Kandahar Province, so that citizens could lodge complaints and those complaints could be investigated. U.S. military and civilian institutions should have trained more of their own emissaries in Pashto and Dari to reduce their dependence on interpreters, who were always woven into Afghan networks and often had their own interests to further.

I have no way to certify that such an approach would have succeeded. But the United States didn't even try. None of the four administrations that carried out this war ever came close to adopting such an agenda.

Of course, Afghan leaders were hardly blameless—not only Karzai but also Ashraf Ghani, who served as president after Karzai and fled the country as the Taliban closed in on the presidential palace. When the former chief financial officer of my cooperative took up his post in the Ghani administration earlier this year, we spoke frequently. “You have no idea,” he told me one day, his voice pale. “No one in this ministry is concerned with anything but his own personal gain.” Even after all he had been through, he was shocked. “I came into my office and I found nothing. There is no strategic plan; no one even knows what this agency's mission is. And there is no one on staff even capable of writing a strategic plan.” Within weeks of taking up his job, he had to cancel a major contract that his ministry had awarded via a rigged bidding process and head off his predecessor's plan to create a parallel ministry that would have controlled the bulk of his budget.

A DISTANT MIRROR

It is likely Afghanistan will soon recede from U.S. headlines, even as the situation there goes from bad to worse. Politicians and pundits will point fingers; scholars and analysts will look for lessons. Many will focus on the fact that Americans failed to understand Afghanistan. That is surely true—but perhaps less important than how badly we Americans have failed to understand our own country.

On the surface, Afghanistan and the United States are vastly different places, home to different societies and cultures. And yet when it comes to allowing profiteers to influence policy and allowing corrupt and self-serving leaders to cripple the state and anger its citizens, the two countries have much in common.

For all the mismanagement and corruption that hollowed out the Afghan state, consider this: How well have American leaders been governing in recent decades? They have started and lost two wars, turned free markets over to an unfettered financial services industry that proceeded to nearly bring down the global economy, colluded in a burgeoning opioid crisis, and bungled their

response to a global pandemic. And they have promulgated policies that have hastened environmental catastrophes, raising the question of how much longer the earth will sustain human habitation.

And how have the architects of these disasters and their cronies been doing? Never better. Consider the skyrocketing incomes and assets of executives in the fossil fuel and pharmaceutical industries, investment bankers, and defense contractors, as well as the lawyers and other professionals who provide them with high-end services. Their staggering wealth and comfortable protection from the calamities they have unleashed attest to their success. Not success at leadership, of course. But maybe leadership isn't their objective. Maybe, like their Afghan counterparts, their primary objective is just making money.

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