
How are Afghan villages actually governed? This guiding question structures Jennifer Murtazashvili’s excellent monograph, Informal Order and the State in Afghanistan. Wedding a political science approach to long-term commitment to fieldwork, this book offers a rare grass-roots perspective on Afghanistan’s rural areas. Murtazashvili calls her approach ‘diagnostic’ since she does not analyze rural people’s livelihoods as mediated through large-scale development projects of the nation-state or international donor agencies, but from the perspective of the communities themselves. She takes her informants’ perspectives seriously without limiting her argumentation to a study of the Afghan countryside.
Focusing on the period from the fall of the Taliban movement in 2001 until the Karzai government in 2014, Murtazashvili carried out her fieldwork in more than 30 Afghan villages across six provinces together with local assistants and without personal armed security. The accounts provided by her informants and the stories she tells about them reflect her deep engagement with the country, her topic of research and the people she has encountered.

Murtazashvili’s book focuses on forms of (self-)governance in rural Afghanistan, particularly forums staffed with so-called traditional or customary authorities (locally referred to as qaryadar, maliks, wakils, arbabs, or namayendos). These are usually male arenas, but Murtazashvili makes an effort to stress the importance of powerful female actors, such as Fatima, a qaryadar from a district in northern Afghanistan, whose story she tells in the preface as an example of how the authority of (older) females is widely recognized and respected. Her introduction situates her contribution within studies on comparative politics and political economy and against works on post-conflict state- and peace-building. The main body of her book is in three broad parts, each consisting of two chapters, the last chapter encompassing her overall conclusion. In ‘The Politics of Customary Governance’ (35–106) Murtazashvili positions her findings on the persistence of customary organizations in rural Afghanistan within a broader historical perspective by drawing on historiography as well as oral history. She argues that the long-standing system of indirect rule has ensured the relative (and cherished) autonomy of communities. The local village council (shura, jirga, rish safidan) has found an equivalent in what Murtazashvili calls ‘externally imposed “development” shura’ created by international donors in their efforts to gain legitimacy in the countryside. Locals have no problem differentiating between these two kinds of bodies and their purposes, and Murtazashvili writes against the assumption that just because a ‘traditional’-sounding name has been given to a local institution it represents the interests of the population. In the end, says Murtazashvili, the dynamic of these interventions boils down to the question, ‘Who controls the villages?’ While foreign donors and the state tend to view local governance in terms of technical assistance, she shows in this first part that for villagers, they were targeting ‘the soul of Afghan politics’ (106).

The second part of the book, ‘Customary Governance and Public Goods Provision’ (111–181), delves into intra- and inter-communal efforts to cooperate in terms of irrigation management or the provision of law and order without the state being present. We know by now that the presence of the international aid industry in Afghanistan does not go hand in hand with a decrease in violence or an increase in local-level confidence. While NGOs are locally regarded as an indication of state failure and weakness rather than as complementary to the government, having received the lowest approval ratings among all public organizations in Afghanistan, local communities know when to address those providing public goods with specific requests, such as for the construction of a school or a mosque.

The final part of the book turns to the complex kinds of interactions between ‘Customary Governance and the State’ (185–257). Contrary to the many approaches that focus on how to bring ‘government in a box’ to the countryside, Murtazashvili is rather concerned with the conditions under which local authorities and state officials engage in power-sharing. Drawing on statistics, she shows why several dominant hypotheses about Afghanistan have to be rejected, among them the ‘ungovernability hypothesis’, which posits customary order as a source of opposition to the state, and the ‘democratic deficit hypothesis’, which assumes that these institutions lack participatory means. Her conclusion is rather that ‘customary organizations serve to enhance support for the state and democratic values’ and that they ‘embody values and norms that are largely consistent with those values in a representative democracy’ (203).

Overall, the book makes for an excellent read. It is clearly structured and lucidly written, and provides the reader with all the necessary background information in an extended three-part appendix (259–299), where she describes her research design, including the locations and
obstacles to carrying out research, gives statistical information from two sources (the Asia Foundation Survey and the National Rural Vulnerability Assessment) which include all questions relevant to her research, and provides a list of all her interviews, including the gender, age, occupation and ethnicity of her informants. The book also offers a glossary as well as an index.

A minor criticism of the book is that it does not engage with the comparative literature from Central Asia. While Murtazashvili cites all relevant sources on Afghanistan and consults the literature on local governance from other continents, the neighbouring countries are remarkably absent from her analysis. Having worked on local self-governance in northern Kyrgyzstan myself (Beyer 2016), I found many of her arguments in line with what my own fieldwork revealed in regard to local authorities (some of them elders), both historically as well as concerning the contemporary era. Moreover, a comparison with recent literature on the state in Central Asia from anthropology, political science and history (e.g. Heathershaw and Herzig 2012; Reeves, Rasanayagam, and Beyer 2014; Epkenhans 2016, to name only a few) would have helped to show that what she has revealed for the case of Afghanistan, namely that self-governance is of local importance and only very difficult to steer ‘from above’, is in fact true for much of Central Asia, where state-building happens through governmental restraint more than through extensive, foreign-funded, top-down initiatives.

In her monograph, Murtazashvili not only shows ‘that Afghanistan is neither ungoverned nor is it ungovernable’ (xxxv), she also demonstrates exactly why this is the case. This remarkable result should be acknowledged not only within Central Asian scholarly debates (in which I include debates on Afghanistan), but far beyond.

References


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