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# Subnational Government in Afghanistan

Michael Shurkin

Prepared for the Marine Corps Intelligence Activity

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## Summary

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### Purpose and Sources

This paper is a primer on subnational government in Afghanistan, and it is meant to inform efforts to strengthen local government in recently cleared areas. Among the problems afflicting the Afghan state are the lack of performance and representation, which together should constitute the base of the state's legitimacy. This paper identifies the various entities of local government. It is based on a review of the available academic and nongovernmental studies of subnational government in Afghanistan and interviews with civilian experts, including consultants attached to U.S. and allied government agencies.

### Findings

**The existing subnational government across Afghanistan is too centralized and weak to fulfill two basic requirements of legitimacy: effective service provision and representation.** The few representatives of the state that are present at the district level are appointed by central government. They are not accountable to local populations and often have few incentives to focus their energies on anything other than personal enrichment, providing for their own client networks, and serving the interests of their patrons.

**Opportunities to make the system more participatory and representative should be sought at lower levels to compensate for weak central institutions; the court system must be strengthened where possible.** Greater participation might make government actors more responsive to local needs, as well as create opportunities for citizens to interact and identify with the state, which otherwise is either distant or predatory. Constitutionally mandated district, village, and municipal elections, had they taken place, would have provided an opportunity to establish a positive link between communities and the state, notwithstanding probable electoral fraud. That these elections are unlikely to take place in the foreseeable future, however, obliges international actors interested in improving governance to work with what few elements of government exist and to improvise using informal bodies. Public fora, including *shuras*, that are attended by government officials should be supported, and public officials should be given incentives to view serving the interests of the public as commensurate with their personal interests. Public courts can be more present and more effective if they are pro-

vided security and the material support required for them to function more efficiently. There must also be mutual recognition of formal and informal justice systems and their relative roles.

**Good intelligence about local politics must precede engagement. International actors hoping to strengthen local government in places like Helmand should be cognizant of the flaws inherent in the current system and attempt to fill important intelligence gaps prior to selecting Afghan partners.** The weakness of even informal government and tribal structures in many areas is such that there is no guarantee that any *shura*, elders, or individuals (1) are representative of their community, (2) lend legitimacy to any action taken with their support, and (3) are not acting at the behest of individuals or interests that are inimical to good governance. Tribes are important; however, the nature of their roles and their relative importance varies greatly from province to province, from district to district, and from village to village.

**Governance metrics must gauge subjective perceptions of the legitimacy of the Afghan state, rather than objective outputs.** Although outputs and service provision are important, ultimately what is “good enough” is a subjective judgment made by Afghans, and our actions have to be planned and evaluated according to their effect on Afghans’ perception of the legitimacy of the state.