Post-Conflict Democratization: Warlord-Democracy Nexus in Afghanistan

by

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Abstract

POST-CONFLICT DEMOCRATIZATION: WARLORD-DEMOCRACY NEXUS IN AFGHANISTAN

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States experiencing violent conflict produce instability that most often results in political disorder and the weakening of institutions and governments. In extreme cases of prolonged conflicts, local non-state power holders replace governments, providing security and missing government functions. In the case of Afghanistan, such power holders have come to be known as warlords and strongmen. This study examines Afghanistan’s 2001 post-conflict political process with a specific focus on the relationship between warlords to democracy. Overwhelmingly, the literature on warlordism has focused on the negative, where warlords and strongmen are perceived as being antithetical to democracy and state building efforts. This study argues that strongmen and warlords, who retained coercive power and legitimacy more importantly, organized and engaged with the nascent Afghan political system where their efforts have facilitated democratization. Through empirical research, this study outlines specific examples of democratic participation on the part of strongmen which has consolidated Afghanistan’s democracy.
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Phases of the Warlord-Democracy Nexus

1. Democracy
2. Civil/Political Breakdown
3. Conflict
4. Militia/Regional Leaders
5. Warlords/Strongmen
6. Political Process Introduced
7. Democracy Introduced
8. Strongmen Politics
9. Politics Influenced by Strongmen
10. Institutionalized Politics
11. Warlord/Democracy Nexus
12. Strongmen Politics

The cycle continues from Democracy back to Civil/Political Breakdown.
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Warlord-Democracy Nexus

Since 2001, Afghanistan has witnessed a significant shift from the violent conflicts of the past to a political process which includes democracy as the basis for contesting power and legitimacy. Central to this shift, or transition away, from armed competition to political contestation has been the role played by non-state armed actors often labelled as warlords. In the immediate 2001 post-conflict period, warlords retained legitimacy in varying capacities while continuing their hold over the monopoly on violence in many areas. As a result, warlords remained to shape Afghanistan’s political process and efforts towards state-building and democracy post-2001. Afghan warlords, involved in the country’s decades of conflict, showed readiness to participate in Afghanistan’s new political system. This was witnessed with their participation in the 2001 Bonn Agreement and the subsequent presidential and parliamentary elections that have since followed. Most recently, the 2014 Afghan presidential elections displayed the greatest interaction between warlords and the elections process where strongmen organized as candidates and critical running mates. These elections were particularly important since they were the first peaceful democratic transition of political power in Afghanistan’s history. Although Afghanistan’s democracy remains imperfect, warlords and strongmen have in fact helped consolidate the democratization process because of the military and political stability which they have provided. This is evident in many areas, not least of which includes their political participation and contestation for legitimacy through peaceful and political means — much different from the violent politics of the past.

Post-conflict peace and political settlements are a necessary step in the aftermath of civil wars, so that a return or continuation of a violent conflict can be prevented. For many states,
once the violence has ended, there has been a transition from the battlefield to the field of political competition on the part of non-state actors or groups originally intent on military victories. Such transitions are witnessed most vividly in conflict zones that have produced multiple rebel groups or militias. It is in such intrastate conflicts that there arises a need for warring groups to transition to legitimate political entities that can compete for political power through elections and other peaceful means. However, post-conflict societies will certainly be influenced by strongmen of various types especially if they remain relevant in their regions while maintaining their coercive abilities. It is assumed that post-conflict societies will be marred by the legacy of non-state actors, particularly in the area of electoral competition because of their “continued presence and influence” over the political process (Giustozzi 2012, 153). The war in Afghanistan, which had been ongoing long before the international community’s involvement, produced many regional leaders and militias who remained influential throughout the country.

In effect, a strong centralized state was established at the expense of the peripheries where most strongmen ruled. It was anticipated that doing so would in return weaken regional leaders and warlords whose powerbase did indeed lie in the countryside and towns away from Kabul. With the interim government of President Karzai, and the excessively centralized nature of the new state, it was argued that “American officials pushed a Constitution that enshrined near-dictatorial powers for the president” (Rosenberg 2014). The architects for a strong centralized state in some ways underestimated the heavily localized nature of post-conflict societies where strongmen govern through their control of security and violence — among other things — providing legitimacy to their rule. As a result, in the post-conflict period, power and legitimacy still remained in the hands of regional leaders and strongmen at a time when the central government was intent on being the sole monopolizers over the legitimate use of force.
Therefore, many important questions exist with respect to this center-periphery tension among state institutions and warlords. How does a post-conflict state like Afghanistan expect to democratize and move forward when such powerful non-state entities retain power and influence in many parts of the country? This study is concerned with the relationship between warlords and strongmen to the political process in Afghanistan. Specifically, this study intends to examine how strongmen have engaged with Afghan democracy in the post-conflict period and if such engagements have in fact contributed to the country’s democratic process? I argue that specific strongmen in post-conflict Afghanistan have shown to be critical sources for moving the country towards democracy because of their efforts to participate and organize around the political process. In essence, this study provides evidence which supports the claim that some of the most vilified Afghan figures in the post-conflict political environment have actually been facilitators, rather than spoilers, to the consolidation of democracy for the Afghan state.

The Afghan Warlord and the Post-conflict State

In conflict zones around the world, non-state actors have come to be known as militia leaders, rebel groups, strongmen or warlords. In the Afghan context, the label of ‘warlord’ has held prominence when describing these leaders even though such characterizations have not accurately explained nor gauged their engagement with Afghanistan’s political process. Most examinations on warlord figures in Afghanistan fail to examine their political capacities and influence while only focusing on their coercive abilities or past military involvements. Regardless of these characterizations which have affected our depth of understanding on these issues, the fact remains that influential leaders with access to power and personal militias
remained in the peripheries as legitimate rulers who have come to shape the post-conflict democratic process. In many instances, such figures retained the support of local populations and have come to be seen as protectors and liberators rather than mere ‘warlords’ who are bent on patronage and driven by violence. In the immediate aftermath of the 2001 conflict, strongmen in Afghanistan remained well-armed and organized which allowed them to continue to be powerful, particularly when the central government was weak and without much influence outside of Kabul. Post-conflict states are known to experience high levels of fractionalization and militarization which results in the breakdown of institutions and political legitimacy. It is in these conditions where strongmen and warlord types come to rule. In the Afghan context, however, warlords still engaged with the informal politics of Afghanistan which were legacies of the pre-2001 period. Informal politics in this context refers to associations with community leaders, tribal chiefs, and religious scholars which are considered much different than the institutionalized politics found in democracies. But as Dipali Mukhopadhyay (2014, 4) highlights, “To understand warlord involvement as simply a weakening of the state is to presume incorrectly of the Afghan state qualities that it simply did not possess.” Therefore the presence of warlords and strongmen were not necessarily a challenge to state bodies and institutions as was understood, rather, in the immediate post-conflict period, warlords and strongmen were filling a void left from nearly three decades of conflict. For that reason, state building attempts and political stability required the cooperation of the warlords and strongmen, especially in the areas of security and legitimacy.

The presence of powerbrokers, militias, and warlords inside post-conflict states can be considered unideal for developing, or even introducing, democracy. Yet, evidently, democracy as a political solution has been the central post-conflict prescription in nearly all conflicts zones
since the Second World War, including Afghanistan. Scholars and policy makers alike have sought to define warlords as spoilers who retain power within their personal fiefdoms while sourcing their patronage through illicit gains and exploitation. However, as Mukhopadhyay (2014) reminds us, “not all warlords are created equal.” After the 2001 Bonn Agreement, so-called warlords held a wide range of political positions inside the nascent state, from vice presidential roles down to provincial and district governors. It is true the some of these figures have in fact been detrimental to Afghanistan’s democratic process where they have become even more powerful with their involvement in the political process.

A puzzle is seen to emerge with respect to ‘warlordism’ in Afghanistan — understood by most — to be an impediment to democracy and a danger to stability and progress. Through an empirical examination of the relationship of former non-state actors to the recent political process, a contradictory reality has emerged regarding the relationship between strongmen and democracy. It is argued that certain ‘warlords’ have indeed engaged with the Afghan state where their motives and actions are consistent with democracy and state-building measures. Why has the engagement of warlords and strongmen, therefore, consolidated democratization in Afghanistan given that such figures are understood to be antithetical to democracy?

In the immediate 2001 post-war period, warlords were awarded government portfolios for their war victories over combating the Taliban. Since stability was paramount, the involvement of strongmen was necessary to represent groups and constituencies where warlords still remained influential and held sway. However, as the Afghan political scene evolved and matured, so did some of Afghanistan’s most powerful warlords. With the principles of democracy developing, many warlords began to orient their politics towards democratic ends. In the post-conflict period, the most powerful of strongmen, such as General Abdul Rashid Dostum and Mohammad
Mohaqiq, strengthened their political parties, organized their voters and developed policies on issues which mattered such as land rights and equal economic distribution, as well as much needed political reforms to address citizen representation and the provision of government services. In addition, figures like Dostum and Mohaqiq ran effective and successful political campaigns over the years, with the 2014 presidential elections witnessing the greatest display of organized political participation on the part of strongmen. Such organized efforts not only proved essential to these elections but also insured the relative peaceful nature of the transition process. A Jeffersonian Democracy was not expected to be built in Afghanistan overnight; nevertheless Afghanistan has been progressing on its path towards democratization where the warlord has contributed to the country’s consolidation of democracy.

Questions to Address for Post-Conflict Democracies

Regional strongmen and warlords are considered to be antithetical to the post-conflict political process, including to the principles of democracy and institutionalized politics. It is said that democratization in post-conflict societies “rarely occurs on a blank slate” where there exists “power holders with vested interests (and considerable skill) in moulding the system to their advantage” (Larson AREU 2011, 10). Democracy includes a wide variety of differing values and ideals which varies markedly from state to region and among those nations who are deemed democratic. Democratic political systems differ from those which are liberal democracies to social democracies, and democracies which are direct to those which are representative. Democracies can also have as their head of state a president or a prime minister, and from those heads which derive their legitimacy from a parliament or loya jirga, to those whose legitimacy is
given to them directly by people. At its most basic and common form, democracies entail an electoral process of voting which allows citizens the right to elect their representatives. Democracies also include political compromise with the peaceful transition of political power that includes the freedom of assembly and the equal application of the rule of law over all subjects. Even in those democracies which would be considered ‘well-established,’ the differences between them have shown that there does not exist a ‘perfect’ system or process for democracy. The democratization of post-conflict societies is a challenging process which requires time and continued efforts to consolidate. Furthermore, democratization is understood as a process without and end-point where it is said to be “constantly shifting between poles of ‘more’ or ‘less’ democratic (Larson AREU 2001, 1). Therefore, democracy in post-conflict societies involves a process of ‘democratization’ that includes a series of improvements which allow for better and equal representation and institutionalized politics. This includes power and political legitimacy being decided by the people. As Charles Tilly (2007, 23) has noted, democratization consists of “increasing integration of trust networks into public politics, increasing insulation of public politics from categorical inequality, and decreasing autonomy of major power centers from public politics.” In essence then, democratization is a process of increased distribution of power and broadening citizen representation which act as causal mechanisms for this process.

Democracy building in post-conflict states would therefore be seen to be furthered challenged or constrained with the involvement or presence of warlords or non-state groups. As Marteen (2012, 7) claims, “warlords rule by force, not governance.” Warlords and strongmen types are conceived to be leaders who are not bound by the rule of law and command personal militias and armies for purposes of coercion and fear. This coercive ability is an extension of the
breakdown of the central government and its monopoly over the legitimate use of force. Regional leaders, therefore, have come to fill this vacuum. Coercion has been a central element which has allowed warlords and strongmen to exert force both in times of conflict and peace. In post-conflict societies, it has been noted that “Informal accountability mechanism such as patronage networks, particularly at the local levels, can temporarily compensate for the absence of formal ones, but can hinder development in the long run (Hoove and Scholtbach 2008, 7). Therefore strongmen and warlords, seen to facilitate the democratic process, presents a paradox regarding the conventional wisdom on warlordism. As Wantchekon (2004, 17) has noted, most theorists have not only predicted, but have also recommended, some form of dictatorship as a system of governance for post-civil war states. However, in the Afghan context, a clear relationship between warlords and the democratic process remains which warrants further study of this phenomenon. MacGinty (2010, 585) has argued that the potential profits which could be earned in the post-Taliban era may have compelled many warlords to change and reach “new forms of accommodation with the nascent state.” Aside from the attitudinal or personal intentions of such figures, this study will instead examine the existing and present political relationships of strongmen to democracy. This study is interested primarily at examining how warlords have engaged the post-conflict political process in Afghanistan where it is argued that they have facilitated and consolidated the state’s democracy.

Therefore, the role of warlords in post-conflict Afghanistan advances critical questions regarding the relationship between such actors to democracy. Specifically, this study will consider questions concerning the role of strongmen to the democratic process and their post-conflict transformation within Afghanistan’s political system. For these reason, this study posits the questions: How have warlords transformed and engaged with democracy? Can warlords or
other non-state groups be a force which can strengthen democracy in post-conflict societies? And, how do warlords come to transition into a democratic polity when they are considered to be experts of violence and rulers through force?

This study will examine if warlords in some contexts are able to embrace democracy, not simply for self-interested reasons, but rather, to help assist in the creation of a pluralistically-viable nation state. This study requires an examination of the transition process and the ways in which warlords have responded to this newly established democratic system as past battlefield leaders to leaders in state and society. The cases of General Dostum, Mohammad Mohaqiq, and Ismail Khan will be examined to show that these strongmen have not only been important military leaders and once former non-state actors, but that they have also played a critical role in the post-conflict political process. Former non-state actors and groups have been in no short supply in Afghanistan, stemming from the country’s many decades of conflict. The focus on these three figures is central since they have been powerful forces both in the pre and post-conflict periods. Therefore an examination of these figures and their engagement provide important clues into the warlord-democracy nexus.

The Warlord-Democracy Nexus

Nations which experience violent conflict are prone to shift political and social ties from state institutions to regional powerbrokers or warlords who replace state-services with personal patronage. These powerbrokers are better positioned to respond in times of conflict, whereby protection and security are paramount. This results in a form of reciprocity in which allegiance to the strongmen is essential. Certain strongmen in Afghanistan have the loyalty of their
followers who regard them as their natural representatives before the state. Legitimacy and support has been a central factor for keeping many warlords relevant in the post-conflict period. This in effect has been important for realizing democracy in Afghanistan which has allowed warlords to participate and consolidate democracy in ways that the government and institutions have not.

Strongmen like Dostum, Mohaqiq and Khan, as well as others, demonstrated that they are survivors in what is the complicated and complex nature of Afghan politics. Many in the international community expected the central government to be strong and effective both in the areas of security and legitimacy, as well as against the warlords. However, theories of post-conflict state-building recognize the difficulties of governing and reforming unruly societies such as Afghanistan where those that have access to power cannot always be ignored or easily marginalized. It was therefore in the post-2001 period where a critical space emerged for strongmen and warlords to transition into a new political environment, while having with them, a level of legitimacy that the state could not extend or present for itself. It was in this context of transition which gave birth to the warlord-democracy nexus which was a transformation of warlord fighters into politicians and political actors.

The case of Afghan strongman and current vice president Abdul Rashid Dostum displays the clearest illustration of the warlord-democracy nexus. Although General Dostum has received the greatest attention with respect to Afghan warlords, Dostum has shown to abide by the principles and processes of democracy as was clearly witnessed in the 2014 presidential elections. Among Afghanistan’s contemporary political figures, General Dostum has one of the longest histories and experiences with respect to Afghan politics and society. General Dostum was elected to the position of first vice president of Afghanistan in the country’s first ever
peaceful transition of political power. This study begs the question as to how such figures have helped democracy in post-conflict Afghanistan. General Dostum was chosen by former Afghan finance minister and development practitioner Ashraf Ghani as his running mate for the 2014 presidential elections even though Ghani had in the past accused Dostum as being a significant “warlord.” Many people were quick to question this ‘unlikely alliance’ between the academic-technocrat, Ashraf Ghani, and the Afghan strongman, General Dostum. However, the participation of strongmen in these elections helped garner mass appeal among Afghans where their participation and campaigning generated millions of votes for these elections. The nature of the warlord-democracy nexus, and its importance in post-conflict states, is highlighted by Ghani in reference to his running mate General Dostum. Referring to Dostum, Ghani (Al Jazeera, April 3 2014) states,

> When charismatic leaders emerge from history, they become more than the embodiment of their individual beings. People literally have walked two days to touch him. One has to have respect and harness that energy that is now focused on the individual to a collective process of building institutions. We are two strong men, we can work together.

The idea of harnessing the energy and influence of strongmen in post-conflict societies is critical to the state-building process. This transition of legitimacy, from strongmen to democratic politics, has allowed Afghanistan to develop a dynamic system that is still influenced by powerbrokers, which in retrospect, was inevitable. However, even before the 2014 elections, General Dostum had undertaken democratic politicking to organize his powerbase to engage and participate inside the new political system. Dostum’s success in democratizing his power, as well as instrumentalizing democracy to enhance his legitimacy, particularly through the political party of Junbish-i Milli Islami Afghanistan, allowed him to maintain his support base and to
formalize his politics. As MacGinty (2010, 591) noted, General Dostum utilized his political party “to channel his supporters’ energies in the post-Taliban era.” These efforts by Dostum allowed him and his party to be considered Afghanistan’s best-organized political group (Ruttig 2013). Therefore it is argued that because of Dostum’s political strengths and his participation in democratic politics, as well as his organized political experiences, the technocrat-strongman alliance proved favourable for the 2014 presidential elections — resulting in the election victory for both Ghani and Dostum.

Why Study Non-state Actors?

Researchers have noted the importance of transforming non-state combatants and militias into political actors and groups where politics is contested through a process instead of through violence. Jeroen de Zeeuw (2008) labels such shifts as a ‘rebel-to-party transformation’ and argues that a crucial step for successfully ending civil wars rests on the ability of former rebels and non-state actors to transform themselves towards organized politics. For De Zeeuw (2008, 20), the extent and outcome of such transitions from armed non-state groups to political parties is shaped, to a large extent, by the terms of the post-war settlement agreement. Afghanistan’s post-conflict settlement process was largely formed through the 2001 Bonn Agreement which provided a critical space for former warlords and strongmen to participate in the country’s political future. The post-settlement period witnessed warlord figures emerge in greater formal and organized capacities to lay claim to official political status. Afghanistan’s many decades of conflict produced groups and individuals who became important actors inside the sphere of
Afghan politics and did, in one way or another, influence the functioning — or non-functioning — of the state over these many years.

There has been a consolidated international effort to assist Afghanistan through its transitioning process, however, the transition process as it relates to warlords have not been given serious consideration. The extent of this transition on the part of warlords against a newly established political system can provide valuable knowledge as to how such ‘rebel-to-party transformations’ occur and how they interact with democracy. Peak, Gormley-Heenan, and Fitzduff (2004, 16) mention the important role local leaders play in post-conflict peace and state-building processes particularly when they represent the “recognizable personification of conflict themselves.” Since warlords and strongmen maintain the principal means over violence in some states, they are considered as the bearers of both conflict and peace in those societies. Therefore, recognizing the ‘personas of conflict’ and their integration process would assist in providing better prescriptions for states in transition since the involvement of influential individuals who retain power are needed if peace is to be fully realized.

**Theory of Warlord Politics**

Dipali Mukhopadhyay (2014) provides the strongest evidence yet that Afghan warlords have been a necessary partner in the post-2001 state-building project. She argues that some of Afghanistan’s warlords have been instrumental because of their strengths and ‘informal capacities’ to govern in areas where the central government in Kabul could not. According Mukhopadhyay, warlords became effective representatives of the government. Such “informal power holders” were perceived by many as a hindrance and obstacle to Afghanistan’s post-
conflict state-building project since warlords are seen incapable of fair governance and rule specifically by force. But as Mukhopadhyay demonstrates, warlords did make effective provincial rulers since they were well positioned to transition from warlords to strongmen governors. The tenures of Atta Mohammad Noor of Balkh and Gul Agha Sherzia of Nangarhar showcase the dynamic relationships which existed between the center and the periphery, and between the formal and informal forms of authority. Both Noor and Sherzia were given high-profile positions in the Karzai cabinet where they carried out the necessary functions of the central government while maintaining relative order and economic growth in their provinces of rule. Mukhopadhyay (2014, 12) highlights the important point that, “In the neopatrimonial political economy, warlord types who operate at the interface between the center and the periphery have the potential to threaten, defy, or contribute to the capital’s claims over the furthest reaches if its territory.” It was therefore in this context that warlords remained to be a formidable entity, whose power and legitimacy was utilized to benefit the state. In Afghanistan’s case, “warlords had the potential to engage in the state-building project as effective provincial governors” (Mukhopadhyay 2014, 48). Mukhopadhyay draws from Charles Tilly’s argument of “coercion, capital, and connection” to show how Afghan warlords became beneficial to the central government in its state-building project. It is argued that these three qualities of power, availability of resources, and local influence were necessary for warlords to undertake the state’s bidding in the peripheries, developing a kind of ‘warlord politics’ in the post-conflict period.

Mukhopadhyay’s research supports the notion that warlords have been critical to Afghanistan in the post-conflict political process. Especially in the area of governance, warlords were needed to extend Kabul’s reach in regions it could not influence nor govern. As Mukhopadhyay (2014, 4) highlights, “The political center in Kabul was not a collection of
formal, bureaucratic institutions working in concert to penetrate the unwieldy periphery of wayward warlords, defiant mullahs, and rebellious tribal chieftains.” Instead, Afghanistan faced a reality which nearly all post-conflict states confront: weak institutions, ineffective governance, lack of legitimacy, inept rule of law, and inability to control for violence. In areas of law and order, it was more or less warlords and strongmen who filled these political and institutional gaps. Therefore failed states which experience institutional breakdowns may come to rely on warlords and strongmen as necessary partners in the state-formation process. I argue that not only have warlords in Afghanistan been a vital force in this process, as demonstrated by Mukhopadhyay, but some warlords in fact have also helped consolidate democracy vis-à-vis their engagements with the political process. This study therefore advances the scholarship on ‘warlord politics’ by broadening this discussion and analysis to include an examination of the role played by warlords in Afghanistan’s democratic process. By exploring the politics of Afghanistan, it is understood that warlords have again played a strategic role between the center and the periphery, this time however, in the area of democracy building. Certain warlords have been instrumental in the democratization of the state where they have helped channel large portions of the population to accept and participate in democratic politics. This was most evident in the 2014 Presidential elections where warlords and regional strongmen mobilized constituents to participate, vote, volunteer, and campaign in the political process.

While the connections between warlords to state-building have been examined, the links between warlords to democracy have been less clear. Scholars who have studied the relationship between warlords to state-building have not extended this connection to include the warlord-democracy nexus. The conventional wisdom among many post-conflict democratization theorists has been the argument in favour of a strong-state ruler similar to a Leviathan as
described by Thomas Hobbes (1651). A strong ruler is seen as necessary to govern over weak and unstable states. Huntington (1968) rejects the immediate resort to democracy for states experiencing political violence and conflict. Huntington (1968, 34) instead calls for a ruler who is authoritative to reside over states experiencing instability and argues, “A well-ordered society must have a determinate human source of final authority, obedience to whose positive law takes precedence over other obligations.” This in effect means powerful, almost Leviathan like, rulers are desired for states experiencing disorder or states in transition since powerful leaders are thought to be better positioned to deliver stability and strong governance. Therefore some scholars have argued for post-conflict states to be governed more or less through dictatorial rule, where democracy and popular representation are understood to be problematic both to order and stability.

In contrast to the Leviathan, Leonard Wantchekon (2004) argues democracies in fact can arise directly from anarchy and disorder often experienced through war. Wantchekon’s *paradox of warlord democracy* contests theories which advise against democratic rule for post-civil war states. Wantchekon (2004, 17) finds that nearly 40% of civil wars between 1945 to 1993 have resulted in some form of improved democracy where an all-powerful ruler was not necessary for political order. Although stability is needed after violent wars, Wantchekon understands democracy to be capable of providing such order as a means of settling conflicts. The connection between warlords and democracy is advanced as a modern phenomenon where warring factions compete through elections as a legitimate means of political contestation. Wantchekon believes warlords will choose democracy in post-war contexts when: economic interests are contingent to popular participation; a more equal system will be established through citizens’ political preferences and participation; and when there is a third party guarantor to act
on issues of disarmament, arbitration and the enforcement of elections outcomes. Post-conflict democracies which create a political constitution and organized politics can therefore result from a “strategic interaction between intelligent warlords” (Wantchekon 2004, 32). As a result, warlords are not only capable of assisting the state, but can also be fundamental to the establishment and consolidation of the democratic process.

This study is concerned with non-state actors associated with the former Northern Alliance who were at war against the self-proclaimed Taliban government. In Afghanistan, warlords constituted the leadership structure insofar as they controlled regions inside the country. The case of Afghanistan highlights the dynamic relationship warlords can have in post-conflict political processes. This was true since the immediate post-Taliban period included individuals and groups who remained armed and organized well outside the state’s authority especially since violence remained prevalent in some parts of the country. Most non-state actors and groups are reluctant to immediately disarm and reintegrate their forces mainly due to reasons of insecurity, but also since these actors are not willing to forfeit their gains from battlefield victories without guarantees. Therefore states must contend with the fact that non-state actors and other groups continue to exist and exercise power which shapes the political process once the conflict has abated.

States which experience intrastate conflicts tend to be divided on region, ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, or a combination of one or the other. Warlords in Afghanistan have almost always been equated with such cleavages where they have produced personal militias reflective of these differences and holding no necessary formal allegiance to the state. In Afghanistan, such non-state actors have historically been grouped into cleavages where the ‘strongman’ or ‘warlord’ label has been used to describe them. Transitioning and settling these
cleavages within a democratic political process remains a daunting challenge. However, after a post-conflict political process emerges, the relationship of such individuals to this process is critical for creating peace and maintaining some form of political order.

In 2001, Afghanistan was considered the classic failed state, exemplified by its fragmented society and dysfunctional central authority (Barma 2012, 285). Jackson (2003, 133) notes that most fragmented states experience a “devolution of power from the centre to the local level.” Prior to the 2001 NATO invasion, Afghanistan was experiencing a civil war with some groups and regions that were unreceptive to the rule of the Taliban. Some regions are still experiencing different forms of conflict. However, now these positions seem to be reversed, whereby it is the Taliban who are unreceptive to the government’s rule. This is indicative of an intrastate conflict since there remains an insurgency which exists to challenge the Afghan National Security Forces. However, parallel to these pockets of violence, a dynamic political process has also unfolded where efforts at democratization and political stability have remained important objectives of the Afghan government and the international community. In light of the new political realities and efforts at democratization, Afghanistan still remains an unstable state where the international community and Afghans themselves seek to avoid a reversion back to full-out violence. As Wantchekon (2004, 17) notes, “The least studied and seemingly most unlikely source of democratization is large-scale civil war.” Post-civil war democratization, for Wantchekon, is motivated by the need to establish a political process which provides warring factions a means to compete without violence. Bermeo (2003, 159) highlights the paucity in the democratization literature regarding post-conflict states and democracy where she mentions, “Most of our theoretical literature on democratic transitions or democratic consolidation leaves the connection to war either wholly neglected or seriously undertheorized.” Essentially how
democracy is related to conflict, possibly through the role of warring factions, has not been thoroughly established. It is therefore necessary to attempt to unravel the links between civil wars and democracy so a more comprehensive understanding is developed especially when such conflicts are increasingly becoming the norm. Shedding light on the role played by strongmen and warlords can help provide insight into how post-conflict states democratize and what steps and methods best facilitate this process and if warlords are capable of transitioning into democratic leaders through ‘warlord politics.’ This is particularly relevant since warlord politics should not be viewed as being static, rather “capable of transforming and adapting under pressure” (Giustozzi 2005, 1).

The Debate

Since warlords are understood to be unlikely sources of democratization, academics and policy makers have focussed on the phenomenon of ‘warlordism’ as being a contradictory reality in the face of efforts at democracy and state-building. Marten (2006, 43) for example argues in the case of Afghanistan, “Powerful actors who benefit from warlordism have sought profit in the short term, paying little attention to the long-term development of economic or political institutions.” This phenomenon is particularly important regarding Afghanistan since it ranks as among the countries with the greatest association to ‘warlordism.’

Since the initial steps taken to re-create the state of Afghanistan in 2001, warlords have remained involved in the government and political process in varying forms and capacities. Some warlords have maintained that, contrary to the many assumptions held by the international community, they are not concerned with personal wealth accumulation, rather they are said to be
committed to Afghanistan’s long-term future (Stanski, 2009, 81). It is understood by some, for example, that warlords are heavily committed to systems of patronage and clientelism whereby greed and fear are central tenets to their power consolidation. William Reno (1998) discusses warlords as resembling a mafia organization that does not consist of any formal government structures. Kimberly Marten (2009, 163) mentions that warlords are “happy to accept bureaucratic or parliamentary positions inside weak states, giving them further opportunities for patronage and profits.” McCormick and Fritz (2009) argue that regimes where warlords are persistent tend to be governed primarily through the threat of force rather than political consensus. However, upon a deeper examination of Afghan ‘warlord politics,’ an opposite narrative and reality emerges where warlords have acted to help strengthen the state, provide services, and contribute to its democratic process. In the Afghan context, it is argued that warlords have been a force for democracy, albeit imperfect, where they have also provided political and military stability needed in the post-conflict period.

It is in light of these arguments and questions that this study attempts to address ‘warlord politics’ to understand how warlords have responded to participate in the democratic process and in what ways they may have contributed to Afghanistan’s democracy. It is important to measure the extent non-state actors or warlords can benefit, as well as challenge, efforts at democracy and state-building. Podder (2013, 17) cautions on studying non-state armed groups solely through the negative where he argues such frames “limit the potential for partnership that certain non-state armed groups offer in the state-building process.” Giustozzi (2005, 13) examines the dynamic political workings of ‘warlord politics’ in Afghanistan since such powerful figures are said to have been involved in the formation of political parties, consultation with constituents
and opponents, formalization of political campaigns, as well as in negotiations to form coalitions for electoral options — all understood to be hallmarks of democratic politics.

In reference to warlord politics and the transition and demilitarization of objectives, Giustozzi (in de Zeeuw 2008, 194) states, “The decision of most Afghan non-state armed factions to engage in the transition to political parties was mainly the result of a number of internal and external factors.” One hypothesis of course, to explain these factors, includes the ‘carrots’ approach which argues non-state actors have been enticed into the new political system by way of inducements that include financial or political incentives. This is possible since some warlords were given portfolios with the new government. However, not all warlords and strongmen have accepted government positions nor have been enticed equally by the state. A second hypothesis is the ‘sticks’ approach which believes warlords in Afghanistan have been coerced to participate in the central government through intimidation or the threat of the use of force either by the state or its international backers, particularly the Americans. This would mean that the ‘rebel-to-party transformation’ has been forced upon Afghanistan’s various groups to pressure them to join the political process. This does not appear to be the case since the most powerful of regional leaders, including General Dostum, Mohamad Mohaqiq and Ismail Khan, worked with the Americans, where the personal soldiers of these figures constituted as the essential ground forces in the overthrow of the Taliban. Therefore such relationships have not existed through coercion, but rather, these relationships have been based on mutual military objectives. In addition, many of these regional leaders and warlords remain highly regarded by the Afghans themselves which makes moving against them — by the state or otherwise — extremely difficult. In Afghanistan’s case, the carrot and sticks approach is said to have had little long-term effect and influence over the motivations and actions of non-state actors (Cramer
and Goodhand 2002, 896). This is largely based on the independent actions and political ambitions of some warlords and strongmen who defined their own political relationships with the state, where in some cases, they re-emerged more effective and politically astute.

A third hypothesis, and a more nuanced approach, and one that is most discussed in this study, argues that such figures have willingly engaged in democratic politics since they have understood that a transition away from armed confrontation to political contestation is the way forward to achieving political legitimacy. As de Zeeuw (2008) notes, transforming armed movements into democratic political parties is arguably the most difficult of peace-building tasks. Many have underestimated the transformative role some warlords have undergone to enter the political process and to engage the state through dialogue and political negotiations as opposed to continued violence. Non-state military actors in numerous contexts have acted rationally with respect to the post-conflict political processes and transition towards democracy. As de Zeeuw (2008, 17) highlights, this was witnessed with the National Resistance Movement in Uganda, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front in Ethiopia, the Sandinista National Liberation Front in Nicaragua, the Mozambican National Resistance in Mozambique, and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front in El Salvador. These groups are considered to have transformed relatively successfully into political parties in the post-conflict periods where political stability and democracy have been reasonably strengthened. Such inclinations to transform have been witnessed in post-conflict Afghanistan as well with the engagement of certain strongmen.


**Warlords and Democratization**

Even if these cases are not convincing examples of democratic participation, some scholarship suggest that democratic outcomes are nonetheless possible in the long-term. Charles Tilly (1992) examined state-making in Europe where both capital, in the form of taxation, and power, in the form of coercion, resulted in creating nation states. Tilly recognizes a great deal of coercion was employed to bring people under the effective control of the state and argued, “When the accumulation and concentration of coercive means grow together, they produce states; they produce distinct organizations that control the chief concentrated means of coercion within well-defined territories…” (Tilly 1990, 19). Furthermore, Tilly (1975) shows contentious politics expressed through non-violent rebellions or protests can be a force for political representation as well as democracy. Tilly recognized that the European state-making experience would not likely repeat itself with modern state-building projects since political and state contexts would vary so widely; yet he also understood some fundamental political relationships would remain the same.

Tilly (2004) examined the relationship between contention — understood as a political or social struggle — to the consolidation of democracy in Europe. Tilly argues that ‘contentious politics’ allowed multiple levels of interaction inside the state where challenges to authority culminated in democracy as a path realized through vigorous protestation. In reference to the British and French experiences, Tilly (2004, 9) explains that “Democratization commonly occurred as a result of struggles during which few if any of the participants were self-consciously trying to create democratic institutions.” For Tilly, democratization does not need to emerge exclusively through actors that adhere to democracy or push for democratic aims; rather, democracy can emerge from uncertainty and through unconventional means.
Warlords would never be expected to be democrats, but Afghan warlords and strongmen have shown that they can strengthen the democratic process with their participation. Of course contention through violence would have no place in post-conflict societies striving to be democracies, but political contention can be healthy for states in transition. Political contention can be in the form of demonstrations, social movements, and campaigning among various other struggles. Tilly (2000) presents forms of conflict as being instigators to democracy. Contention through conflict has been evident in Afghanistan as well where regional figures have been involved in struggles for power and authority for many decades. Such contentions have resulted in developing leaders who represent large segments of the population, both politically and militarily, in and prior to Afghanistan’s era of state collapse. A statement made by a former Northern Alliances commander and well known strongman from the north helps explain how military actions of the past translated into politics in the post-conflict period. Atta Mohammad Noor asserts, “I have no regrets about my past. It was the best way of education about how to be organized and so it teaches one how to govern” (Peake 2003, 188). It is argued that the struggles and contentions experienced among warlord groups in Afghanistan also sparked a ‘contentious attitude’ towards the political process and their transitions to democracy. Tilly (2004, 9) provides perspective regarding democratic systems by claiming,

As a consequence, we should expect that prevailing circumstances for democratization vary significantly from era to era and region to region as functions of previous histories, international environments, available models of political organization, and predominate patterns of social relations. We should also expect to discover not one but multiple paths to democracy.

Contentious politics have been instrumental in Afghanistan’s political process which has allowed regional leaders to compete and also participate in coalition building more so through a
negotiated process. This in effect has mobilized official and non-official segments of society and reshaped old trust networks and alliances to fit the politics of the day. Therefore through contentious politics, Afghanistan’s populations have come to know, and accept, democracy and elections as a process towards which their governments gain legitimacy and the right to rule. The Asia Foundation (2010, 6) found that 81% of Afghan respondents agree with democratic principles including equal rights and fair representation. The involvement of warlords has helped enforce this process and provided a level of formal procedures and sophistication not normally witnessed in Afghan politics.

In summary, then, this research sets out to examine if in fact warlordism can actually be a driving force for democracy and political stability in some settings. This research argues that warlords have exhibited democratic tendencies which have shaped Afghanistan’s political transition. Projecting the degree of stability which will last beyond the withdrawal of international troops is of course yet to be seen. Nonetheless, this study will explore the relationship between such figures to Afghanistan’s political process and what it means for democracy. For example, can warlords also compete democratically and for legitimacy in post-conflict states? This study demonstrates that warlords have played an important role in Afghanistan’s transition from conflict to democratic participation in a manner which is consistent with the fundamentals of democracy. Many scholars find it difficult to accept that post-conflict societies which produce regional leaders or warlords can in fact move successfully away from the ‘bullet to the ballot’ in an effort to establish peace and political stability. This study argues that warlords and strongmen in Afghanistan have participated democratically which has been central to the emergence of a dynamic political system that has moved away from violent struggles to political competition. Moreover, this study will establish the fact that warlords are
far more complex and politically astute than given credit. Although not a perfect political system, the developments which have occurred can help establish theoretical understandings that can further explain how democracies emerge in post-war states.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Scholarly research examining the relationship between warlord figures to democracy is not conclusive whereas studies examining warlords as entrepreneurs of violence are more extensive. Warlords in Afghanistan and beyond have been framed as spoilers and coercive actors who are outside the state’s control and whose legitimacy is said to be derived through violence and patronage. For Stanski (2009, 75), the term warlord is problematic and has acted as a “framework through which to interrogate longstanding cultural constructions about Afghanistan.” Therefore this notion of simplifying Afghanistan’s political situation and its various actors into terms of ‘warlord’ or ‘warlordism’ is to associate the Afghan narrative with violence and disorder. The consequences of such simplifications present many problems, including the quality of scholarship which may be produced on Afghanistan.

Some scholars (see Olsen 1993, Tilly 1990, and Mukhopadhyay 2014) have examined the warlord phenomenon from a different approach which has been essential to this study and the extension of theoretical frames regarding the warlord-democracy nexus. Therefore a review of conflict studies literature in general can help establish the basis for further examining warlords and their relationship to democracy. Studying armed non-state actors as facilitators of political and military stability, as well as democracy, challenges norms and theories widely held regarding warlords. The current scholarship has looked at the negative aspects of warlord politics through a deductive or theory testing approach. This research instead attempts to examine how warlords have been a source for advancing democracy in post-conflict Afghanistan where it is argued that they have been a force for the consolidation of democracy. Reviewing literature necessary for this study includes: Firstly, an analyses on ‘warlord politics’ in Afghanistan, secondly, and
examination of post-civil war politics, and lastly, a review of leadership transitions in post-war societies.

Theories of Warlords and Warlordism

The rise of non-state actors and strongmen in contemporary Afghan politics can trace their origins to the time of the 1979 Soviet invasion. This invasion was in response to the 1978 Saur Revolution which saw the Communist PDPA undertake a coup d’état against the first Afghan president, Mohammad Daoud. President Daoud was cousin to Afghanistan’s monarchal King, Zahir Shah, as well as the Shah’s former prime minister. Daoud himself came to power through a coup against the King whom he overthrew in 1973 in an attempt to establish a republic. President Daoud’s swift modernization programs — first initiated by the King and continued after his overthrow — did not fare well with large segments of the Afghan population who still maintained strong connection to both religious and cultural traditions. This push for modernization from the center to the peripheries resulted in pockets of revolt from Afghans in villages which gathered national momentum, ultimately manifesting into the Mujahidin resistance group. The Soviets invaded to provide military support to their communist allies in government who depended on the Soviets to suppress the growing revolt. Because of this outside invasion, a gradual upsurge of resistance began to occur where various commanders organized around efforts to repel the Soviets and their occupation. As the Soviet-backed government began to weaken and lose legitimacy, these influential commanders acquired increased control and influence, particularly among ordinary Afghans in the villages and in the countryside. After the Soviet withdrawal some of these influential commanders rose in ranks
and grew even more powerful to the extent of controlling large town and provinces, and even regions inside the country. These commanders and past military leaders would later become known as Afghanistan’s warlords.

Marten (2006, 49) notes the phenomenon of warlordism in Afghanistan as being a product of its many wars where it has not been as culturally entrenched as compared to Europe’s experience with warlordism. For Barnett Rubin (2002), warlordism in Afghanistan is the result of its forced integration into the modern state system where it’s not inherent to the country’s traditional socio-political experiences. This can be equated with the many forced reforms and attempts to modernize Afghan life through the center and into the villages which initiated the revolts against the government in the first place. Historically, the term ‘warlord’ is said to have been used to characterize figures after the collapse of the Qing Dynasty of China in 1911 (Mackinlay 2000). This dynastic collapse resulted in a series of civil wars which pitted competing provinces, one against the other. The term ‘warlordism’ for Mackinlay is assumed to be an “ugly, pejorative expression, evoking brutality, racketeering and the suffering of civil communities” (2000, 48). Szeftel (1989) states the term warlord in the past has been used to describe regional overlords in China who imposed their rule over local populations as a means of personal control and administration. In the European experience, Jackson (2003) argues that before the emergence of the nation state, there existed autonomous regions governed by local rulers, referred to by many labels, including, barons, dukes, and warlords. Jackson states that such individuals were “essentially autonomous within their own regions, enforcing laws, raising taxes, raising armies and providing protection in return” (2003, 134). Marten (2012, 3) defines warlords as “individuals who control small pieces of territory using a combination of force and patronage.” For Olsen (1993), warlords have been a source of security in the face of anarchy in
reference to 20th century China. Shahrani (2009, 6) has found local populations in Afghanistan to have a “fairly sophisticated assessment of their own local and regional leaders” where Afghans are not in a constant state of fear or exploited, rather, they view some of these leaders as legitimate rulers.

The inconsistency of the warlord label has caused many distortions when studying post-conflict Afghanistan. Afghan Human Rights Watch officer Zia-Zarifi (2004, 10) describes the warlord terminology in reference to Afghanistan as such,

Warlord is not a technical word. In Afghanistan, it is a literal translation of the local phrase “jang-salar,” and it has simply come to refer to any leader of men under arms. The country has thousands of such men, some deriving their power from a single roadblock, others controlling a town or small area, and still others reigning over large districts. At the apex of this chaotic system are some six or seven major warlords, each with a significant geographic, ethnic, and political base of support.

As Zia-Zarifi notes, the warlord label has come to describe a wide range of actors, from criminal entities and gangs who are looking to exploit and make illegal monetary gains, to regional figures that represent large segments of the population. Efforts to group all non-state actors of different calibre into a single entity has resulted in much of the confusion with respect to this phenomena of warlordism particularly when ‘major warlords’ have participated in democratic politics. This is not to deny the existence of others who remain to exploit through criminal enterprise, however, distinctions must be made between those who are violent and those who are willing to compete for political power. The lack of distinction can be attributed to those who are not interested in the intricacies of armed groups or the dynamic outcomes which take place in states experiencing conflict. Furthermore, interviewing and gaining access to warlords through personal field research is a difficult task which is possibly why refined definitions and
understandings have not emerged with respect to warlordism in Afghanistan. Negative descriptions which invoke stereotypes associated with illegitimate strongmen functioning outside legal state-society structures are the dominant views regarding warlords. However, such descriptions undermine and distort those strongmen who have the political legitimacy of their constituents and who have assumed democratic politics as a means of engaging with the state.

For Giustozzi (2005, 9), a warlord is a “non-state political-military actor who has military legitimacy, but little or no political legitimacy.” In Afghanistan’s case, it is argued that such definitions do explain the warlord phenomena to a certain degree, but there exists as well, many figures that retain a great deal of political legitimacy outside their military power. For example, regional strongman Ismail Khan, who hails from the western city of Herat, has been characterized as a significant warlord due to his past association with militias and regional control. At the same time, however, Khan has been seen as an important political player in Afghan politics. Khan served both as governor of Herat, and more recently, the position of Minister of Water and Energy, before joining the 2014 presidential ticket as a running mate. In the first round of election, the team of Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, for whom Khan ran as a first vice president, came in fourth place with nearly half a million votes. In the second round of these elections, Khan threw his support behind presidential contender Dr. Abdullah and his Reform and Partnership team which was an important endorsement particularly for votes from western Afghanistan where Khan remains influential. Therefore, regional leaders like Khan have both the military and political legitimacy to their title whereas others are seen to wield only military power. It is believed that since America’s involvement in Afghanistan, no influential figure has been able to elude the ‘warlord’ title (Schetter, Glassner and Karokhail 2007). Figures such a
Khan — although being labelled as a significant warlord — have participated in the democratic process in a significant way.

In Afghanistan, most ‘major warlords,’ such as Khan, are associated and linked to specific ethnic groups found in different regions of the country. For states experiencing instability, power becomes defused “when state institutions collapse” which later get exerted through “informal and incoherent means” by local non-state actors and their groups (Ponzio 2011, 3). The violent and prolonged conflict witnessed in Afghanistan resulted in the collapse in the state’s central authority and its ability to govern. Therefore a level of self-autonomy had been ingrained in the people who ultimately connected with their immediate communities and leadership structures based around linguistic and regional cleavages. The Uzbeks in the north, for example, were able to maintain strong connections stationed around similar ethnic-linguistic qualities found in northern Afghanistan. This was also the case with the Tajiks in the north-east, the Pashtuns to the south, and the Hazaras in the central highlands. Therefore Afghan national identity in the post-conflict period remained resilient, where socio-political connections were local and rooted mostly in ethnic, religious and tribal affiliations (Mukhopadhyay 2014, 2).

However, it is thought that loyalties in Afghanistan have always been associated to one’s tribe or village elders which is markedly different then the state-citizen relationship found in Western liberal democracies (Radnitz 2004, 513). In some incidents, as MacGinty (2010, 584) notes, “Warlords are likely to exploit a shared identity within their constituency” based on geography, ethnicity, or religion. With Afghanistan’s attempts at democracy, it is said to be inaccurate to separate “warlords from the general pattern of Afghan society and present them as rogue military leaders” (Giustozzi 2003, 4). The case of Afghanistan presents a shift away from ‘warlordism’ to political contestation whereby influential warlords have competed through democracy and a
political process. In order to understand this transition, and if indeed such individuals have played a positive or negative role in Afghanistan’s democratic process, it is necessary to study the political organization and participation of these individuals.

**Post-civil War Politics**

Civil wars are said to be more difficult to resolve than interstate conflicts (Licklider 1995). Walter (1999, 139) argues that, “Countries emerging from civil war have deeper societal divisions, more fragile institutions, and greater temptations toward exploitation than almost any other kind of state attempting to democratize.” When analyzing democracies in post-civil wars states, it has been found that the stability and balance of power between non-state actors to the government is essential for any transition process (Joshi 2010). In reference to Afghanistan, Mukhopadhyay (2014, 14) states, “The fledging post-conflict state was surrounded from the start by a formidable set of informal power holders, warlords, with their own military, fiscal, and political capacities to consider.” Therefore the difficulties post-civil democratization face warrants further examination regarding key elements of the political process including relevant actors and potential spoilers. Intrastate conflicts can, and will, produce competing militias or warlords who are regionally bases and politically affiliated to different groups within society. Therefore the military and political elites among them are expected to influence — in varying capacities — the political process in the post-conflict period. However, uncertainty remains regarding democratization since it is not exactly known whether or not “political actors in a society are capable of embracing democracy,” or if they are interested in democracy as a system of organization and governance (Schmidt 2008, 112). In post-conflict societies, Grimm (2008,
541) notes, “Democracy requires the willingness and ability of all relevant actors to play the
democratic game according to new rules without relapsing into violence.”

Prior to the democratization of any post-civil war state, power-sharing between groups
can be a facilitator for a peaceful political settlement while helping move the political process
forward. The literature on power-sharing is vast with varying opinions regarding the merits if
power-sharing for post-war states. Arguably, the benefits of such agreements will depend on the
specific contexts with regards to each state and the make-up of its political players. For de
Zeeuw (2008, 19), power-sharing agreements help create “opportunities for establishing a
relatively open political arena” where competing groups can discuss and challenge positions
through political means. Power-sharing for Cammett and Malesky (2012, 983) is seen as an
important post-conflict policy prescription since it allows the main warring factions to be
incorporated into the new political system in which case they can foster “vested interests in its
stability and proper functioning.” This would therefore allow for past competing parties to
transform from military competitors into political groups. The 2001 Bonn Agreement set out
guidelines which attempted to engage multiple competing positions in the post-conflict period
which succeeded in getting all groups, except the Taliban, to accept the new political
arrangements. Therefore power-sharing agreements can force elites and competing groups to
agree on specific terms that are representative of all groups while setting the political agenda for
moving forward. However, some scholars see power-sharing as being ineffective for lasting
settlements and advocate on its potential harms. For example, Rothchild (2005, 252) holds
reservations and argues power-sharing agreements may allow “the prospects of peace in the
short-term, providing incentives to weaker parties to sign agreements, while becoming a
potential source of instability, ineffective governance, and inter-group conflict in the long-term.”
Jung (2012) sees power-sharing agreements as undermining long-term democracy building, whereas Sriram & Zahar (2009) argue power-sharing among competing groups can harm efforts at democratization since it may allow individuals and groups not committed to democratic ideals, such as equal representation and fair governance, to have access to power.

Once the fighting diminishes the importance of integrating and allowing warlords and other armed groups outlets to participate within state institutions through democratic means cannot be underestimated. In regards to Afghanistan, it has been noted that the international community’s initial military success was due to the alliances created with local commanders and warlords (Peceny & Bosin 2011; Williams 2010). Therefore, without such alliances, the overall conflict in Afghanistan would have been intensified — engulfing even greater areas of the country. As a result, there has existed a balancing act of sorts in relation to strengthening the state’s monopoly over the legitimate use of force while retaining the influence of warlords and strongmen who remained powerful in their personal and military capacities. This approach was an indirect form of power-sharing where the center relied on the warlords to maintain order and stability in the peripheries. Mukhopadhyay (2014, 7) notes that warlords in the post-conflict period were in a unique position to fill the divide between the ruler (state) and its citizens. Khalilzad (2010, 42) argues that after the “internal conflicts wind down, political conditions often enter a warlord phase.” Such ‘warlord phases’ may be inevitable as a prerequisite for democracy to emerge, and the inclusion of non-state actors within the political process is seen as a necessary step for ending the violence.

An important body of literature exits which addresses the functionality of democracy in contexts that would not seem ideal for democracy to develop. Specifically, how do groups which for the first time are interacting with democracy behave in the political process? And, do
former military leaders have the predisposition to act democratically where their involvement in the process would help improve the democratic system in general? Scholars have discussed the ‘inclusion-moderation hypothesis’ to help explain democratization in Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) states. This hypothesis claims that the inclusion and participation of so-called radical or fringe parties within the political process leads to the moderation of such parties and their ideologies. Schwedler (2007) finds inclusion is far more likely to moderate the ‘political sphere’ than exclusion while noting that it may not completely solve for militancy. This means that more parties are willing to participate through a democratic political process which is non-violent when allowed and encouraged to participate. In reference to Afghanistan, Mukhopadhyay (2009, 9) found that the “integration of warlords into the new state also began a transformation for several of them into more responsible political actors.” Therefore the participation of some strongmen in the post-conflict political process proved beneficial in this area. There is of course the issue of including former combatants, where the possibility of them challenging the democratic process exists. Some figures may not be willing to accommodate their positions inside the state which can also have an adverse effect on both the political agreements set forth and democracy itself. With respect to the warlord-democracy nexus, the question remains whether warlords and strongmen agree to play the democratic game as a means to exploit new political opportunities that are created. In reference to past Islamists participation in Egypt’s politics, Carrie Wickham (2004, 224) has found that “limited political openings short of democratization can also induce radical opposition leaders to moderate their public goals.” Therefore, democratic outlets for participation have been found to moderate certain political groups through consensus and compromise.
The Transition: Warlords to Politician

General patterns of political transition regarding warlords and strongmen provide insight into this process where extensive studies on this have not been undertaken. In the Afghan experience, it is evident that warlords have transitioned to politician and bureaucratic roles in varying capacities where ‘warlord politics’ have evolved with the political process. Giustozzi (in Astri and Berdal 2012, 168-169) sheds light on this process, which for many warlords, posed a dilemma. Giustozzi states,

After 2001, virtually all the most powerful armed actors present on the Afghan scene tried to convert themselves into political parties and to establish a foothold in the new parliament…The process was necessarily controversial: in order to maximize their chances of success, strongmen of various kinds had to use their original sources of influence, that is armed force, while at the same time distancing themselves from it.

This transition, which posed a dilemma for many strongmen, reflects the center-periphery relationship which existed in Afghanistan, particularly in the immediate post-2001 period. A genuine transition from warlord to politician required disengaging from armed politics which also resulted in forfeiting coercive force on the part of the strongmen. Mukhopadhyay (20014, 12) argues that there is a “need to push past canonical conceptions of ‘warlordism’ and consider the undeniable transition that a number of these actors have made in Afghanistan from fighting commanders to strongmen bureaucrats.” Indeed, in a political rally in 2014, General Dostum stated, “We are tired of armed conflict, we now fight politically.” Such declarations exemplify the conscious decision of strongmen to compete in democracy for political power. For some ‘major warlords,’ their transformation included organizing and formalizing their powerbase in an attempt to ‘democratize’ their positions as a means to political legitimacy. It is believed that
once such figures join a government, their specific posts allow them the authority to dominate economic resources under the façade of state sovereignty and all that is associated with it (Reno 2002, 855). Peceny and Bosin (2011) highlight the perceived challenges faced by the Americans insofar as having to rely on ‘warlords’ to overthrow the Taliban while trying to promote a liberal system of democracy. In order to effectively gauge the validity as it relates to post-civil conflict transition, it is important to examine the ‘rebel-to-party transformation’ and its effects on democracy and the political process. Therefore it is important to establish ways in which warlord’s transition from the battlefield to the field of politics.

For Bermeo (2003, 169-170), post-conflict states which are relatively poor with a weak civil society and party systems, as well as no historical connections to democratic institutions, can transition into democratic politics. Afghanistan’s experience has shown that Bermeo’s claims regarding post-conflict states and democracy is likely, even those these states may have difficulties with their democratization process and remain unstable. In regards to political arrangements in times of transition, Cramer and Goodhand (2002) believe that a strong centralized authority should be favoured. A strong centralized authority is expected to strengthen the government at the center while increasing its monopoly over the legitimate use of force. This would explain Afghanistan’s centralized government structure in the post-conflict period even though it did not best reflect Afghanistan’s traditional system of governance. In contrast, some scholars believe that the creation of a federally arranged polity is the most viable system for post-conflict states since federalism allows for greater decision making to be made at the regional and local levels, therefore strengthening democracy and creating peace and stability (Bermeo 2003; Radnitz 2004). This is particularly important for weak states that have no choice but to engage powerbrokers. With respect to federalism, it has been regional leaders and
strongmen who have been the most vocal in advocating for a federal system for Afghanistan. Again, to what extent is such advocacy a means for further empowering the strongmen? Or is the call for federalism a genuine attempt to strengthen democracy and provide equal representation for all regionals and groups inside the state?

The transition from warlords to politicians has varied, factoring in not only the individual and their groups but also their immediate political and organizational arrangements after the war. For example, Atta Mohammad Noor, a warlord from the north “demonstrated an interest in transitioning from a military commander into a politician but was prepared to disarm his forces only when his political future had been secured” (Mukhopadhyay 2009, 536). Therefore military leaders will not easily transition into a political process unless their security can be guaranteed. In addition, some warlords are interested to retain their power while using force as a bargaining chip before the state. It is evident, however, that some regional leaders have had a greater democratic transformation in the new system when compared others. MacGinty (2010, 585) argues that the profits which some warlords were expected to make in the post-Taliban era did compel many to transition and adapt to the new rules. The transition to democracy for post-civil war states is more complex since the end result is a potentially fragmented country where not all individuals or groups are equally inclined to transition into the new polity. These transitions become further complicated since such conflicts tend to produce competing enemies which are all vying for power. Licklider (1995, 681) highlights the difficulty of these transitions since “members of the two sides must live side by side and work together in a common government after the killing stops.” Furthermore, Walter (1999, 134) states, “peace settlement must consolidate the previously warring factions into a single state, create a new government capable of accommodating their interests, and build a new national, nonpartisan military force.”
Therefore, the challenge of successfully undertaking a transitional process from a non-state actor to a political representative has its difficulties. The relationship warlords have to democratic politics can help shed greater light into this transition process and democracy building.
Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

Much of the research discussing warlords has focused on their perceived threats both to state-building and democracy. However, analyses examining warlords as a phenomena within the context of state instability and institutional breakdown — where the strongman is legitimated and even admired — provides for a far more nuanced and detailed explanations regarding post-conflict societies and ‘warlord politics.’ The latter approach has served as the bases for this research while attempting to present a different perspective to post-conflict democratization that has largely been ignored in the literature and which also challenges some of the dominant views held on this subject. Much of the analyses and scholarly work focuses on the predatory nature of warlords, which in this context, undermines the democratic process for post-war states. The potential constructive relationship between warlords to democracy has not been extensively explored, nor fully understood.

A study of non-state actors in post-conflict states, and their transition into competitive politics, can help provide a more systematic understanding to this issue of ‘warlord politics’ and democratization. Examining non-state actors who are perceived as illegitimate to outside observers while they remain certainly legitimate to the local populations can help shed light on possible opportunities for states in transition. To fully appreciate post-conflict democratization in Afghanistan, it is essential to study agents of political change, who in this case, came in the form of warlords. The immediate post-conflict transition on the part of armed leaders and groups did dictate, to a large extent, how the political process in Afghanistan moved forward and transitioned. Therefore the people’s representations and political will in many regions were expressed through these power holders who accepted democracy as a system of governance.
Examining the behaviour and actions of certain warlords helps identify the transition post-conflict states undergo and possible modes towards democratization. It is important to note however that this study is mindful of the human rights violations which numerous Afghan strongmen stand accused. Although this discussion and analysis examines issues regarding state’s which are attempting to democratize, the scope of this research unfortunately cannot examine in any great detail the violations and charges presented against these figures (see Human Rights Watch 2003). In addition, this study addresses issues and realities that are specific to Afghanistan, being the central case-country for this study, and therefore will not necessarily examine the phenomena of warlordism and ‘warlord politics’ in other states.

Methodologically speaking, Afghanistan is a good country to examine since it has all the prerequisites as it relates to a civil war and a democratically structured political system. In addition, the post-conflict period included the presence of strongmen who remained to shape the socio-political nature of the state. Since the overthrow of the Taliban, constitutionally speaking, Afghanistan is organized within a political framework based on democratic principles. Afghan democracy, as stipulated in Article Six of its Constitution, bestows democratic rights on all its citizens and provides every eligible voter the right to choose their government through elections. This is a significant change from the decades of war which Afghanistan had been experiencing. Afghanistan’s tumultuous and violent history produced numerous warlords whereby examining their relationship to the democratic process is central to this study. This research will study, and go beyond the simple relationships between warlords and the political process, which in the past, has just included symbolic appointments to government positions. Instead, this study will examine how warlords organized and politicised their politics and grievances through democratic avenues which has come to actually define Afghanistan’s efforts towards democracy. This study
will provide tangible insight into ‘warlord politics’ and explore the political engagements of warlords in the post-conflict period.

The central question of this study aims to get an accurate account of a process and would therefore fall under the descriptive research category. This research is qualitative in nature since individual responses and group dynamics have been essential to addressing the study’s central questions. The study of Afghanistan’s warlords and strongmen consisted of a combination of both primary and secondary research. Initially, relevant documents and scholarly reports were reviewed which comprised the initial phases of the research process. These included, government records; international reports; academic journal articles; researched books; case studies on Afghanistan; Afghan political party archives; investigative reports; documentation of militias and opposition parties in Afghanistan; and also, information regarding political trends in the region.

To fully gauge and assess the relationship between relevant actors inside a conflict zone and their political engagements with democracy is a challenging undertaking. The fluidity of the use of the term ‘warlord’ when describing Afghanistan’s non-state actors is self-evident since it has come to characterize a wide range of actors from legitimate regional leaders to fringe criminal entities looking for exploits. Therefore this study is solely interested in ‘legitimate’ post-conflict actors who played a critical role during the war periods and who have had considerable political clout on the changing dynamics of state. This study focuses on individuals and their groups who are considered the ‘major warlords’ as described by Zia-Zarifi (2004) since such figures are not only the most exposed, but they also have a political base of support which has been instrumental in the post-war period. In addition, this study includes individuals who were not only military leaders but individuals who clearly attempted to transition into the new
space of democratic politics which has been important for studying the ‘rebel-to-party transformation.’ Many of these warlords and strongmen have been associated with the former Northern Alliance group where the warlords in this study have all been important leaders in this alliance. Focusing on the more powerful and influential of these figures provides clearer examples of the transition process since they were in a powerful and well-armed position both before and after the war. Therefore their relationship to the political process has been more important when compared to other actors who are not considered among the ‘major warlords.’ These warlords, as a result, formalized their positions to engage with the state and the democratic process which helps explain the warlord-democracy nexus.

This study examines the transition of three specific ‘major warlords,’ who in essence, have been some of the most influential and important players of the pre and post-war periods. The transition and interaction of Abdul Rashid Dostum, Mohamad Mohaqiq, and Ismail Khan are examined here as mini case studies to highlight how former non-state actors engage with democracy and the effects of such engagements. The study presents the argument that non-state actors in the form of warlords have helped advance and consolidate Afghan democracies through their participation in politics and their transition into democratic organizations. The notion of Afghan warlords being anti-democratic entities which have hindered the state-building process, as well as undermined the country’s political stability, it is argued, does not hold true for all cases.

The primary data collection for this study consisted of field research inside Afghanistan which included interviews with a wide range of actors and participants. Conducting field research in a conflict or post-conflict state poses many challenges both for the researcher and the individuals being examined. This can range from issues involving safety and access, to issues of
ethics and accuracy of responses particularly when uncertainty and danger can exist for the participants being studied. Accessing potential sources and possible leads always becomes an issue in environments that are unstable and prone to violence. For example, at the time of conducting field work for this study, the south and east of the country were not conducive for field research given the pockets of violence in these regions. Therefore field research for this study mostly occurred in Kabul and in the Northern provinces which were more accessible and easier to penetrate which has the potential to limit the scope of this study. However, since I was focused on individuals and groups associated with the Northern Alliances, the case selection and projections for interviewing remained sound since these participants were located in the regions where the fieldwork was conducted.

The initial interview process for this study began in the summer of 2013 at a private conference held in Munich, Germany which addressed Afghanistan and its future political objectives. The Munich Process, as it was titled, brought together journalist, intellectuals, politicians, and academics who discussed Afghanistan’s political developments and agenda for the 2014 presidential elections. This conference served as a means to establish contacts and conduct preliminary interviews which were essential to my research when in the field. Many participants I had met and interviewed in Munich were necessary for this study since these contacts proved essential when in Afghanistan and helped me establish further contacts for this study. Such interactions were essential for the snowball sampling method of interviewing which I used in this study. Fieldwork of this nature requires snowball sampling especially when a strong contact base doesn’t exist in the case country. Such sampling allowed me to build on contacts and work through sources while accessing important figures essential to this research. I was able to interview regional leaders, former combatants, serving and ex-serving politicians,
political party representatives and spokesmen, academics, personal working for non-
governmental organizations, village and community elders, youth movements, high-ranking
former ministers, and local Afghan citizens. Interviewing and participating in ethnographic
observations with a wide range of participants provided for a more detailed and systematic
explanation as to both the transitional nature of non-state actors as well as how Afghans view
their leaders. Interviewing former commanders as well as observing locals discussing politics
and political leaders presented important and rich clues with respect to the views Afghans hold
towards democracy and the ways in which people engage with the democratic process.
Interviews with participants allowed for a computation of many responses which developed
patterns and helped filter accurate and reliable information. The interviews and the
questionnaires were conducted in an open ended fashion to allow the participants time to expand
and explain their ideas even though a prepared and scripted questionnaire was followed. This
helped build stories which were extremely useful for developing narratives and casualties
between events and situations where such details would have been missed without undertaking
fieldwork inside Afghanistan.
Chapter 4: Findings - Warlords in Systems of Democracy

In November of 2001, the capital city of Kabul officially fell to the US backed forces of the Northern Alliance who had been fighting the Taliban regime for nearly 6 years. This partnership between the Northern Alliance and the Americans fit with the American strategy of a ‘light footprint’ where the US military would provide the necessary airpower and support to the local Afghans who would comprise the primary combat forces needed for the ground assault. These combat forces were supplied, and under the command, of regional leaders such as Abdul Rashid Dostum, the late Marshal Fahim, Mohammad Mohaqiq, as well as others, who consist of the opposition leadership. Additionally, with these regional leaders, the Americans imbedded CIA officers and Green Beret Special Forces teams who provided various kinds of military and intelligence support to these leaders (Williams 2013, 209). The most noteworthy of these alliances was between the Americans and General Dostum who famously led cavalry charges with 2000 Uzbek-Afghans on horseback against the Taliban in northern Afghanistan. This consolidation of irregular armed forces was in response to the Taliban who had taken over much of the country by 2001. Therefore before the US involvement after September 11, 2001, the Taliban and the Northern Alliance were engaged in a bitter battle that quickly manifested into Afghanistan’s second civil war of the 90s. It was through this conflict that non-state actors re-emerged in terms of regional and ethnic identity and in opposition to Taliban who were mostly Pashtun and from the south. As it has been argued, civil wars produce various forms of non-state actors and groups which are structurally defined in terms of the context and circumstances of the conflict. In the case of Afghanistan, it was in the form of regional leaders and warlords who came to lead Afghan opposition against the Taliban regime.
It was with the fall of the Taliban that warlords and strongmen in Afghanistan entered as formidable political players in the post-conflict period. It was unlikely that figures such as Abdul Rashid Dostum and Marshall Fahim, whose forces were essential in the swift collapse of the Taliban government, could be excluded entirely from the political process. The United States and the Karzai government understood this, and therefore, favoured a “phased transition that accommodated powerful political figures” within the new political system (Khalilzad 2010, 43). Effectively integrating non-state actors within the new polity is a necessary post-conflict strategy where a policy of isolationism of powerful leaders will likely deter attempts at far reaching peace. In addition, if powerful figures feel that they are not being fairly represented, then they are more likely to act as spoilers who exploit and undermine the political process for their own advantages. Therefore warlords in Afghanistan not only shaped these processes after the war, but the democratic participation of some helped to mobilize the country towards democratic political ends.

The 2001 Bonn Agreement was the first formal stages of participation on the part of warlords and strongmen in the post-conflict period. It was during this conference that strongmen of the Northern Alliance entered into negotiations with the international community to discuss and implement a post-conflict strategy and vision for Afghanistan’s future. This broad-based approach of inclusion and participation of different actors from Afghanistan’s many groups was seen as a positive response on the part of warlords to engage the political process. The Bonn Agreement was not specifically intended to be a detailed post-conflict political settlement; rather, this agreement was to provide an outline for moving the process forward through future political negotiations (Rubin 2004, 6). A central term of the Bonn Agreement stipulated that an emergency Loya Jirga (Grand Assembly) be held within six months of establishing an Interim
Authority which would then be followed by a constitutional Loya Jirga within eighteen months in order to approve a new constitution for the country. Even though the militias of the Northern Alliance maintained an upper hand with respect to power and guns on the ground, warlord leaders of the Northern Alliance understood that a democratic response was necessary for political order and stability to take root. Rubin (2004, 7) states, the Northern Alliance agreed to the “UN-monitored emergency Loya Jirga as the legitimating device for the process of building a more representative government.”

The initial Bonn Agreement set out the process as to how future institutions in Afghanistan would be structured and what democratic political system would be created. This agreement also forced tough negotiations regarding government positions and administrative authority. This was particularly important since it was inconceivable to outright marginalize so-called strongmen — who had essentially been the victors of the war — from the post-conflict political process. When armed groups or non-state actors are engaged in democracy, external actors can accommodate such positions “while overseeing a gradual transition toward democratic politics” (Khalilzad 2010, 42). The political system which was ultimately adopted included a strong central authority by way of a president that would govern and administer nearly all aspects of the political sphere even though Afghanistan has historically been governed from the local. This was in opposition to the many delegates, including some warlord groups, who supported a parliamentary system which they argued would ensure a “coalition government that would be more representative and inclusive, safer from potential abuses of executive power, and hence more stable” (Rubin 2004, 12). Such views regarding the organization of the future polity provides insight with respect to warlords and their perspective on organized politics and representation. Although a more localized political structure could allow for some warlords to
retain their authority in the event of decentralized politics, it would be unfair to state that all warlords had this in mind when calling for a federally structured system. Such negotiations on the part of warlords also signalled their willingness to depart from being only military actors in favour of a democratic process of equal representation.

The case of Afghanistan’s post-civil conflict transition and the role played by warlords in this process was never expected to develop without its problems. Any such transition after violent conflict presents itself with numerous difficulties, specifically in the areas of power sharing and governance. However, it is important to take stock of which approaches can work for democracy and which do not, while also acknowledging the role played by certain strongmen in the consolidation process. This is true given the military and political weight that such actors had where they were able to reassure their supporters that they would be represented in the new government. This resulted in a population who were willing to cooperate and work, via strongmen, with the new political elites, who in many instances, came from outside the country. As part of the Bonn Agreement, government portfolios were given to Afghanistan’s powerful regional leaders (Peake, Gormley-Heenan & Fitzduff 2004, 27). This allowed for some political stability since it afforded the people access to the government. Further political support was given to strongmen since they were able to hedge Taliban activities in their areas of influence (Peceny & Bosin 2011, 610). Transitioning armed non-state groups is a difficult process which involves accommodations on the part of all those involved. As de Zeeuw (2008, 3) notes, the “transformation from rebel movement into political party is neither linear nor one-dimensional.” Therefore the transitioning of strongmen in Afghanistan was neither an easy process nor without its difficulties.
However, it’s increasingly becoming evident that post-conflict democratization and peacebuilding does require the involvement and participation of former combatants and armed groups. For Mukhopadhyay (2009a, 8), “Governance in many countries involves a combination of formal and informal activity.” Informal networks in this context include warlord figures and strongmen and other non-state powerbrokers. Mukhopadhyay notes that warlords have been able to maintain control through informal networks, but acknowledges that certain warlords have also transformed into more responsible political actors because of their interaction in the post-conflict political process. This is consistent with the ‘inclusion-moderation hypothesis’ discussed earlier, even though Mukhopadhyay notes that such informal institution can run parallel to the formal institutions which can result in undermining the state’s power and ability to govern.

Rebel-to-Party Transformation

De Zeeuw (2008) notes that transforming armed groups into political parties is one of the most difficult tasks in the peace-building process. This study has so far presented the theoretical underpinnings of ‘warlord politics,’ including fundamental facts related to our understanding of post-conflict states and democratization. The soldier-to-politician transformation as highlighted by de Zeeuw provides valuable insight into our understanding of armed groups and their relationship to the political process. This section provides an overview of three specific strongmen which includes both a historical analysis of each case as well as their post-conflict engagement with Afghanistan’s political process. The new political arrangements allowed many warlords and strongmen to re-configure and re-orient their political positions, including past military influences, vis-à-vis a democratic process. Although not all warlords have exhibited
democratic traits, where democratic inclinations among warlords have been markedly different, some warlords have nevertheless participated in democracy which has allowed the political process to move forward relatively peacefully — considering the country’s violent past. For de Zeeuw, the relative success of some Afghan strongmen has come to challenge notions of warlordism.

**Abdul Rashid Dostum and Junbish-i Milli Islami Afghanistan**

Abdul Rashid Dostum, an ethnic Uzbek from the north, is a national figure because of the roles he has played in Afghanistan’s politics over the many decades. General Dostum was born into a very poor farming family in the province of Jowzjan where he later joined the Afghan military under communist rule, rising quickly in ranks and serving as a five star officer general (McCormick and Fritz 2009, 84-85). In examining the warlord-democracy nexus, General Dostum is a classic example of a former military leader and strongman turned political leader. This considerable successful transition into democratic politics is a testament of General Dostum’s ability to lead both in times of conflict and relative peacetime. The political party of Junbish-i Milli Islami Afghanistan, founded by General Dostum, has also played a critical role in General Dostum’s political achievements since it has acted as a point of organization and support both in the post and pre-conflict periods. Giustozzi (2005, 17) mentions how the efforts of Dostum to establish Junbish as a political party has indeed set a precedent among Afghan political parties which has changed the nature and role of party politics in the country. With the communist government of Najibullah, General Dostum led the single largest militia in the country under the Fifty-Third Division (Williams 2013, 120). Being from one of Afghanistan’s
minority groups, Dostum emerged as a nation figure with his role in the fall of Najibullah’s government in the early 1990s. General Dostum was also central in the overthrow of the Taliban where he was a leading figure in the Northern Alliance with the late commander Ahmad Shah Masood. Prior to the Taliban’s overthrow, Dostum, together with Afghanistan’s other minority groups — mainly the Tajiks and Hazaras — united to form the Northern Alliance as a military opposition to the Taliban but also included attempts to establish a broad-based political coalition.

In the post-2001 period, with the emergence of a new political state, General Dostum was named to the post of Deputy Minister of Defence, and later, to Chief of Staff to the Afghan army. These posts were seen to be largely symbolic but did signify a process of integration on the part of strongmen into a government apparatus which intended to curb the influence of warlords. The political party of Junbish, initially created as a unity movement of the north in the early 1990s, has served the interests of primarily northern groups since its establishment. For some, Dostum is considered Afghanistan’s quintessential warlord with his powerful base and large networks of support where many have also questioned his role in the nation’s past conflicts (Riedel 2014). However, in 2013, General Dostum became the first significant Afghan leader to apologize for his role in these conflicts. This was seen as a notable step for a country fraught with conflict and violence, where it is believed that “Dostum’s words may have opened this politically sensitive painful subject to public debate” (Clark 2013, 1).

Arguably, General Dostum has undergone the greatest ‘rebel-to-party transformation’ among all of Afghanistan’s strongmen. This was particularly evident in the 2014 presidential elections which saw General Dostum elected as vice-president in the country’s first peaceful transfer of power. In reference to Dostum’s transition into democratic politics, Peszkowski (2012, 2) makes note of the fact that, “The one larger party with roots in the country’s jihad and
civil war era of the 1980s and 1990s that has actually embarked on some sort of a sustained reform process is Junbish.” Even though Junbish has had its internal problems and power struggles, Peszkoski sees Junbish as a politico-military faction that is most committed to becoming a full political party. Therefore General Dostum, through his engagement with the political process, provides significant insight into the warlord-democracy nexus and therefore the democratization of post-conflict states.

**Ismail Khan and Jamiat-i Islami Afghanistan**

Ismail Khan is a strongman from the western city of Herat who was a former Mujahidin commander against the communist government and later an influential figure in the Northern Alliance. Khan has come to be known as the ‘Emir of Herat’ because of his influence in times of war and peace over this province. Khan is an ethnic Tajik who is loosely affiliated to the quasi-political party of Jamiat-i Islami Afghanistan and has served as both a military and political leader in his time. Khan began his career first as soldier in the Afghan military under the communist where he was stationed as a captain of a garrison in the province of Herat. He later joined the Mujahidin after realizing his views were dissimilar to that of the communist government and he felt much of the policies being implemented were against traditional values and Islam. After joining the Mujahidin, Khan gained stature particularity for his ability to raise a substantial militia in western Afghanistan and the successes he was able to deliver against government positions in that region. Taking his skills and experiences learned as an officer in the national army, Khan is said to have created a “vertically organized structure,” which had in it, various committees tasked to administer and provide services for people in that region (Dietl
2004, 47). This allowed Khan to be respected by his followers and be perceived as a legitimate leader given the power vacuum with the breakdown of the state. Hence, Khan became the most famous of Mujahidin commander in western Afghanistan both during the Soviet occupation as well as after their withdrawal (McCormick and Fritz 2009, 85).

Khan has also been credited for liberating Herat from Taliban rule which allowed him to retain his position in the post-conflict period — further legitimating Khan inside the province. Regarding political matters and admiration towards Khan, a tribal leader from Herat had noted during the Presidency of Hamid Karzai that, “We are going to see President Karzai, to tell him that Ismail Khan is our spiritual leader and our hero. We support the transitional government, but only through him” (Walsh 2004). Khan’s ability to deliver security and services, while having the support of the people of Herat, allowed him to be a representative of the province before the state. His alliance to the political wing of Jamiat, however, is said to be unstable at times even though he shares many political and ethnic connections with the majority of Jamiat’s leadership (Giustozzi 2003, 12). This loose relationship with Jamiat’s leadership on the other hand has allowed Khan to be able to maintain greater independence with regards to his political associations and chains of command. It is believed that under Khan’s rule, Herat has enjoyed relative stability compared to other regions inside the country which has also allowed Khan to become quite wealthy because of his position and close proximity to the vital Iranian-Afghan trade border.

In the post-conflict period, Khan was appointed as governor of Herat which allowed him to maintain his influence in this region. However, problems became apparent with the Karzai government because Khan is said to have been reluctant to transition into national politics and loosen his autonomy over Herat. Khan insisted that he maintain his independent rule due to the
relative stability which he could deliver in his region. Khan did attempt to establish a more formal presence through the creation of a political party; however, he did not fully succeed in institutionalizing his position which did affect his political power vis-à-vis the political process (Giustozzi 2003, 14). Khan would later serve as Minister of Water and Energy in 2005 which was largely seen as a means for Karzai to draw Khan closer to the central government in Kabul and away from his stronghold, thereby weakening his influence over Herat. As McCormick and Fritz (2009, 85) explained, “In a pattern we have seen repeated many times in Afghan history,” Khan was able to take “advantage of the ensuing political vacuum to assume control in Herat and establish a mini-state in the western part of the country.” This continued influence over western Afghanistan allowed Khan to be an important vice presidential running-mate in the 2014 presidential elections.

_Mohammad Mohaqiq and Hizb-i Wahdat-e Islami Afghanistan_

Mohammad Mohaqiq, another Afghan strongman, is an ethnic Hazara from the historic province of Balkh in northern Afghanistan. Mohaqiq also became involved in the Afghan military and political scene during the time of the Soviet occupation where he led a resistance from his home province in the north. Mohaqiq was a junior to Ali Mazari, who at the time was a central leader of the Hazaras community in Afghanistan. However, after the death of Mazari, Mohaqiq gained a greater leadership role over the ethnic Hazaras which allowed him to become an important figure within Afghanistan’s oppositions groups who stood opposed to the Taliban. Mohaqiq’s main base of support mainly stems from the regions of central Afghanistan where there is a significant Hazara population, as well as various districts inside Kabul.
After the founding of the military-political party of Hizb-i Wahdat-e Islami Afghanistan in 1989, Mohaqiq was given a leadership role inside the party. Later however, due to political differences, Mohaqiq split from the core leadership structure of Wahdat-e Islami and instead established Hizb-e Wahdat Islami Mardum-e Afghanistan — a separate party but with strong political roots still in association to Wahdat-e Islami. Both parties are said to include less former military officials in its leadership when compared to other groups which has served Mohaqiq well in the post-conflict political period. Mohaqiq has been credited for being able to united Hazara youth, intelligentsia, and clergy around a strong ethno-nationalist platform (Giustozzi 2012, 164, in Atri and Berdal). Furthermore, Mohaqiq position as an opposition commander has allowed him to establish strong bonds with other past opposition figures which has served him politically well.

For Giustozzi (2012, 165), the case of Mohaqiq illustrates “how the transition from strongman to politician could happen quite quickly even without reliance on armed politics.” In Karzai’s government, Mohaqiq was recruited to serve as vice-president, and later, as the Minister of Planning. However, due to difference with Karzai and other government figures, he was relieved of his position but remained influential with his constituents and with the opposition class. During the parliamentary election in 2005, Mohaqiq received the highest votes out of all other candidates which earned him a seat in the parliament (Ponzio 2011, 172). This success displayed his ability to politically organize and garner votes. His objections to Karzai, particularly with the issue of more recognition of Hazara rights helped solidify Mohaqiq as the central representative of the Hazara ethnic group. Leading up to the 2014 presidential elections, Karzai’s continued marginalization forced Mohaqiq to align with the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance and members of different opposition groups (Sakhi 2014, 12). In the 2014 presidential
elections, because of his popularity, Mohaqiq was chosen as a running-mate to the candidacy of Dr. Abdullah where he was able to help generate large segments of the population to vote, resulting in their team winning in the first round of elections and coming in second place in the runoff elections.
In Picture: Strongmen and Elections

Afghanistan’s political players: Technocrats, academics and strongmen

An attendee at a campaign rally in northern Afghanistan
Campaign rally in the city Bamiyan in Central Afghanistan for the team of Ashraf Ghani, Abdul Rashid Dostum and Sarwar Danish. Standing Buddha statue remains hollowed in the background, a reminder of the Taliban’s rule

Support for the team of Ashraf Ghani, Rashid Dostum and Sarwar Danish in General Dostum’s stronghold of Kunduz
Ashraf Ghani and Rashid Dostum look on to supporters at a rally in Kabul

Strongman Mohammad Mohaqiq address a large campaign rally in Kabul
Dr. Abdullah sitting between strongmen Ismail Khan and Mohammad Mohaqiq

Strongman and First Vice President Abdul Rashid Dostum casts his ballot in the first round of elections in Kabul
Abdullah Abdullah and strongman Mohammad Mohaqiq attend a political rally in Kabul.

Ballot boxes for the elections are being delivered to remote villages in Afghanistan.
Dr. Abdullah and his team cast their ballots for the first round of the presidential elections in Kabul

Ashraf Ghani addresses a large crowd in Takhar province, another stronghold of General Dostum
Democratic Warlords: Traits and Actions of Post-Conflict Leaders

Post-conflict societies face many challenges when attempting to rebuild state institutions and governance systems especially when instability remains. A central objective of former war-torn societies in transition has been to facilitate free and fair elections which help sets the country on a path towards democratization and pacify any armed contentions that may have been produced as a result of past conflicts which instead can now be expressed through political means. To realize elections, agreements with third party guarantors like the United Nations, or another outside force, act as important stabilizer which can help unify diverse groups around the political process while insuring that election results are accepted by all those who participate. Elections after civil wars can be a particularly challenging process which must take into account a number of factors that include both the pre and post-conflict conditions. Such factors include not only the socio-political structures of the state after the war, but also the cultural and traditional norms regarding the society’s understandings of voting, democracy and the rule of law. For post-conflict societies which undertake elections, those groups and personal with past armed associations should be required to participate in the political process while all forms of armed politics being outlawed.

In Afghanistan, certain powerful strongmen who maintained forms of coercive ability have not been as detrimental to the political process as initially expected. This fact stems from the involvement of strongmen in the country’s post-conflict elections, where in all incidents they accepted the elections results and did not resort to violence or spoil the process. Furthermore, the country’s ‘major warlords’ have observed the Afghan Constitution to a great extent and have organized their politics around the Constitution and its laws and principles. Since some have argued that a ‘warlord phase’ maybe unavoidable, warlords and other armed actors who do
accept and participate in the political process can facilitate or help shift politics away from armed competition. Although political deadlocks and competition against the state by some Afghan strongmen has occurred, most challenges have existed to remain political and within the constraints of the constitution where contentious negotiations rather than violence has been the norm.

The main stakeholders after 2001 included both strongmen and politics elites, where in many incidents, these elites came from outside the country. Therefore such actors and stakeholders required and expected, with help from the international community, to develop and sustain the country’s political system. This proved to be an extremely complicated task since ideological differences existed between the western educated and trained politics elites and the strongmen. The warlords and strongmen who had fought bitterly for nearly three decades were arguably the most apprehensive in this situation because it was them who had finally witnessed a cessation of violent conflict with the overthrow of their rivals, the Taliban regime. Therefore not only did they have the greatest to lose if the political agreements were again to result in violence, but also many of the strongmen and warlords survival depended on the political outcomes from the new political system. Additionally, warlords understood that if their positions were overwhelming challenged, or themselves outright marginalized, then both a military and political vacuum could exist which they, nor the state, could not afford. Since many warlords understood the true nature of war and political disorder better than most, there was a sense among many of Afghanistan’s ‘major warlords’ regarding the enemies abilities to re-emerge and once again become a powerful force. Therefore, knowing the realities of Afghanistan, some strongmen such as Marshal Fahim and General Dostum took a more personal approach to the security and state-making process where they understood that if they were to totally remove their coercive ability
and security networks there would be no way for the newly minted Afghan National Army to hold grounds and to go on the offensive against the battle-hardened Taliban fighters.

Mackinlay (2008, 48) notes, “In crisis zones around the world where civil wars and humanitarian disasters accompany the struggles of societies in transition, the warlord is the key actor.” For Afghanistan, warlords not only remained to continue their hold over the monopoly on power in various areas, but this was coupled by the large public support that some of these men still carried. Therefore some of the ‘major warlords’ did not have to go to great lengths to remain relevant and influential in the post-conflict period. Such participation on the part of the strongman demonstrated that armed actors and groups can transition with the state towards democracy if they have confidence in some sort of a political process. It should be noted that figures such as Khan and Dostum “established a formalized and occasionally institutionalized hierarchal structure” to their political parties and political positions in the aftermath of the conflict (Giustozzi 2012 in Astri, 165). Since formalized and organized politics is an effect way to engage state politics and the society at large, warlord’s approaches to the state through democratic politicking did in fact result in more ‘democratic warlords.’ This section will address the democratic tendencies and abilities of some Afghan strongmen and argue that the ‘rebel-to-party transformation’ in their cases have been relatively positive, whereby democracy has been consolidated overtime.

**Afghanistan’s Political Process**

As mentioned, Afghanistan is governed through a constitution which defines the powers of the government while also specifying the legislative process and the political system. This
new constitution is largely based on the central tenets of the constitutions from the 1920s but has been revised to include important amendments which were necessary to reflect and better address the current realities of Afghan society and politics. A major revision contained the inclusion and declaration of free and fair elections as the deciding factor for the president through a popular vote. Elections in Afghanistan have thus served as an important reinforcing mechanism for democratization even though the country has faced difficulties in this process including allegations of fraud and voter abuse. According to Kumar (1998), post-conflict elections serve to legitimize both government and politics through peaceful transfers of power which is a critical component of the democratization process.

The participation of strongmen has allowed a more competitive and dynamic system to emerge since such figures, being in positions of both formal and informal authority, were able to act as a check against the powers of the central government in vary capacities, including when many joined to form the political opposition. Therefore, some of Afghanistan’s ‘major warlords’ did in fact check against government abuses and overreaching power even though this may have prolonged the governments full monopoly over the legitimate use of force. For example, strongmen have been involved in initiating civil disobedience against the state when they felt that the state was acting undemocratically or against the people’s wishes, particularly in the regions where they held support. The appointment of governors by the Karzai administration to provinces where such appointees were unpopular sometimes resulted in civil disobedience and protest. The example of Juma Khan Hamdard, an ethnic Pashtun, who was appointed governor to the two northern provinces of Baghlan and Jowzjan, where the overwhelming majority of the peoples are from a different ethnic group and did supported their appointments, is a clear case. While governor in Jowzjan — a provincial stronghold of General Dostum — Hamdard was
forced to give up his position after protesters rallied against the government’s decision to appointment Hamdard to the mainly Uzbek province. Hamdard had once been a supporter of the Taliban in the north and therefore his appointment to this Northern Province did not fare well with its citizens where many viewed his appointment as a front to the principles of fair representation. People in this province also felt as though the governors’ appointment was being imposed upon them whereby they had no say in the politics of their province. It is believed that General Dostum had supported and initiated the protesters to take to the streets and oust the unpopular governor from his position which was largely understood as a legal and democratic demand by the people of Jowzjan province (Ibrahimii 2010). Another significant incident when warlords or strongmen acted to check a potential undemocratic position was witnessed during the Bonn Process where some political elites and their international backers called for the reinstatement and restoration of the former monarchy of the late king Zahir Shah. However, warlords in this case were the main objectors to this idea during the Bonn Process and instead called for a constitutional government with elections serving as the main bases for political legitimacy. These strongmen and military leaders, who had just recently returned from months and years of fighting, would not accept a family-run monarchy to be reinstated. Therefore the current democratic political process is as much an outcome of warlord demands as it was the international community’s efforts to find a political solution.

Afghanistan’s Constitution has played an important role in helping to diffuse armed politics of the past towards a more inclusive approach to political contestation. Article Thirty-five, found in Chapter Two of the Constitution, declares that political parties “Shall not have military or quasi-military aims and organizations.” Also, political parties must not be formed around tribal or ethnic identities if they are to be considered legal entities and political groups
under the rule of law. This order was necessary in the demilitarization process for many of these former military-political parties where their connection to armed groups was outlawed. Rubin (2004, 17) notes how Afghanistan’s constitution for the first time recognized “ethnic pluralism” and “political unity” which was important for holding the many factions together and addressing the grievances of minority groups, that in the past, had been discriminated on. For the Northern Alliance, establishing more rights for minority groups was a sought after demand in both the pre and post-conflict period where members of this alliance were willing to compromise their post-conflict positions and pre-war powers in exchange for certain guarantees. Therefore the political process, with the diffusion of power and the need to compete politically, was also supported to a large extent by strongmen who were willing to accommodate their powerful positions for equal representation and the that acknowledge of minority rights.

In 2010, The Asia Foundation carried out a survey which found that 81% of Afghans agreed with the democratic principles of equal rights and equal representation, in which 74% of respondents agreed that elections have been an improvement to country. This study also found that sympathy towards armed opposition groups dropped from 56% in 2009 to 40% in 2010. These trends are indicative of the strong support for democracy among the Afghan people and show that armed politics was no long desired as a means of power and contestation. Democracy was not totally unknown to the people of Afghanistan when it was introduced in 2001. As Miller (2013, 9-10) notes, during the time of King Zahir Shah, Afghan’s voted for their own prime minister on several occasions were the parliament also exercised “real power” were it could. Furthermore, there have remained traditional decision-making bodies which are very much democratic in their methods and procedures which were included as part of the constitution and legislative process. For example, Shuras (consultative councils) and Loya Jirgas, held by key
members of society, have democratic and representative elements to them (Katzman 2011, 21). General Dostum and others based much of their decisions and political positions after input from important tribal elders and influential members of society via consultative councils (Williams 2013, 18). In reference to Khan, Dietl (2004, 54) mentions how Khan would host weekly meetings to solve disputes and seek advice from local intellectuals and community members on a whole range of issues. Shuras and Loya Jirgas therefore are fundamental and important features of Afghan culture which have remained important procedures to the state’s social and political make-up. As a result, many of the warlords and strongmen in discussion have engaged with such traditional councils which have been a source of legitimization for the Afghan strongmen.

**Intra-party Politics and Democracy**

Political systems that support effective party politics do take time to develop particularly when states have weak or non-existing institutional structures necessary for supporting them. With the fall of the Taliban, many political parties in Afghanistan registered for official status through the government. Historically, Afghanistan has a weak party tradition with the late King Zahir Shah declining to sign into law political parties even though Afghanistan’s 1964 Constitution allowed for the organizing of political parties (ICG 2013, 2). Nevertheless, Afghanistan has not been totally void from party politics or political organizations. It was during the first constitutionalist movement period between 1903 and 1909 which first witnessed attempts at organized politics in Afghanistan (Ruttig 2006). Therefore, by 1960 and into the 70s, Afghanistan had various politically organized groups, albeit mostly Islamic and communist in ideology, which helped bring people together under a political platform for mobilizing with and
against the state. However, these vary groups became extremely weakened after the Soviet invasion in 1979 with the breakdown of the state. The 1990s witnessed a resurgence of political groups which were more in the form of military-political parties necessary for war organization and recruitment. At the head of these parties were various strongmen whose leadership structures were purely military and consisting of commanders and militia leaders. The most influential of these political groups included Jamiat, Hizb-i Wahdat and Junbish — parties which have been associated to some of the most powerful warlords. These political parties played an important role not only during the era of conflict, but equally important were their roles in the post-conflict period. These parties have consisted of military-style structures where various leaders and commanders comprised of the decision making bodies which included decisions regarding aims and objectives to future planning. Some of these political parties have been discussed, with the largest and most successful of them, having been headed, or still headed, by strongmen. When compared, some political parties have shown significantly different organizational capacities where these parties remain active in the Afghan political scene.

Junblish-i Milli Islami Afghanistan, the political party established and once headed by General Dostum, has undertaken many reform processes where it is considered the party with the greatest organizational structure and capacity. Junblish as a political party partakes in intra-party decision making procedures within a formal process which is one feature that has set Junblish apart from the rest of the political parties in Afghanistan. These reforms and attempts have helped Junblish transition in the post-conflict period where it is understood that Junblish is now concerned with purely political matters and is not interested in the military-political issues of its past. In light of party politics in Afghanistan, Peszkowski (2012) argues that General Dostum’s Junblish has been the most keen to re-create itself through specific reforms and political aims.
Furthermore, as de Zeeuw and de Goor (2008, 230) find, Junbish is “the only organization whose use of armed militias has been much more restricted and whose party structures, though very limited, are slightly more organized.”

Therefore this section intends to examine the dynamics of Junbish specifically to further demonstrate political party transformations in post-conflict Afghanistan. The focus on Junbish is three folds. First, Junbish is the political party of General Dostum, who perhaps, has received the most attention with respect to warlordism in Afghanistan. Second, it is the one significant political party that has permitted outside observers into its organizational and leadership structures which has allowed information regarding Junbish to be easily accessible and abundant when compared to other Afghan political parties. Finally, Junbish’s efforts to democratize and become a non-military political group have been the greatest among all other political parties in Afghanistan which therefore provides far more useful analysis and insight regarding the warlord-democracy nexus.

Junbish is noted among Afghan political parties since it has remained resilient and effective in the post-conflict period. For these reasons and more, Junbish is a case in point with respect to the warlord-democracy nexus since it exemplifies the transformative nature of a past military organization which aspires to be fully political and democratic. In regards to this transformation, many have observed Junbish’s attempts to orient itself in relation to Afghanistan’s new political system. In this respect, Peszkowski (2012, 2) shows how Junbish as a political party has “established party structures at district and provincial levels with internal elections” where it has also “attempted to curb the influence of the old military class of the party’s past, and tried to force them to play by the rules of the party as enshrined in a party charter,” including elected memberships. This for Peszkowski, “puts Junbish apart from the rest
of the major parties that emerged during the conflicts of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, providing a potential positive democratic example.” The level of sophistication and the re-organization of Junbish are important to note especially when much of these efforts and the stewardship of Junbish have been under the guidance of General Dostum himself.

Although Junbish represents positive example with respect to party politics and democratic reforms, it has not been completely sparred from power politics and internal struggles. As Ruttig (2013) has noted, Junbish has experienced its share of controversies in its attempts to be more democratic with allegations of “illegal ousting” of party members and coercive politics. In a particular incident, it was alleged that the chairmen of the party was illegally ousted without authorization as outlined in the party’s charter. According to Ruttig, the chairman had argued that any such dismissal can only be approved through a party congress where the congress is the only body that is authorized to relieve chairmen from their posts. This claim was disputed however by leading party officials within Junbish who referred to the party’s charter themselves as defence for his expulsion. What is worth mentioning regarding this incident and these allegations is the fact that both sides to this dispute based their positions and arguments within the parameters of the party’s rules found in its charter, and as Ruttig notes, both sides had grounds to their arguments as stipulated by party guidelines. The fact that internal debates and political contentions exist within a party strongly associated with a leading strongman is a departure from the political violence of the past where it can be understood as a positive shift in Afghanistan’s efforts at democratization and party politics. The reference to a working party charter shows the capacity of Junbish and its adherence to a political process. This exemplifies a rule-based approach and constitutional framework existing within Junbish which has allowed some forms of checks and balances to be administered.
During the civil war, political parties in Afghanistan largely existed to serve two main functions: Unify leaders and commanders for war purposes and to provide an outlet to establish a support base among the people. The previous characterization of these groups as being military-political parties is therefore accurate. However, the focus of some these parties shifted in the post-conflict period from military to political with others yet to fully detach themselves from their military past and armed association. Political parties of the 1990s were mostly remnants of Mujahedin groups that were influential in their resistance against the Soviets. Junbisch came into being as a reaction by General Dostum against the attempts by President Najibullah to re-centralize power and to again create Pashtun political hegemony over regions and territories where Pashtuns have no historical connections or legitimacy (Giustozzi (EM) 2009, 103). Pashtuns overwhelmingly live in the southern and eastern regions of Afghanistan and therefore Najibullah’s decision to send Pashtun commanders to predominately Uzbek regions in the north was unacceptable to Dostum.

After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, the historical center of power in Kabul — which had been ruled by ethnic Pashtuns since Afghanistan’s inception as a state — weakened with more power being diffused to the peripheries under commanders and regional leaders. Therefore the balance of power shifted vis-à-vis Pashtun rule which had lasted up until 2001 but changed after the post-conflict period. One of the reasons why the Taliban ruled with such brutality over all other ethnic groups was essentially their attempts to assure their past dominance which had been lost to regional leaders from different ethnic groups during the civil war. In the post-Soviet period, northern leaders and commanders, led by General Dostum, established Harakat-i Shamal (Movement of the North), as a defence against forms of aggression from politically dominant groups. It was out of this movement that Junbisch developed with its enhanced “collective
bargaining power” due to its amalgamation of a wide variety of northern groups (Giustozzi (EM) 2009, 107). In its founding, Junbish’s 31 members Executive Council was composed of a “surprise mixture of various northern interests” including government forces and communists, as well as Islamic parties and religious and ethnic minorities (Peszkowski 2012, 4-5). Such diversity was a rarity during those times which can be attributed to Dostum’s personal visions for a plurality in national politics. In June of 1992, Junbish was formally established through a party congress which elected General Dostum as the party leader. In the past, or more recently, the organizational structure of Junbish has been governed relatively by functional internal checks and balances with a diffusion of power among elected personal. This has further prompted Junbish to democratize its internal party politics with a reformed charter and elections which decide the party’s leadership. Junbish’s Charter states that a congressional assembly be held every two years which votes on matters of politics and elects members to various position inside the party. Junbish has held three congresses to date but has faced difficulties in administering its fourth which was scheduled to take place in 2011 (Peszkowski 2012).

A strong trait of Junbish had always been its diversity where no ethnic group overly represented or dominated the party’s leadership structures. However, as the situation further worsened in the 1990s, with ethnicity playing a factor in alliance-making, Junbish naturally came under the control of its Uzbek leader, General Dostum. The composition of the party became ethnicized once it experienced pressure from multiple fronts due to the civil war. Initially, after Tajik affiliated Jamiat assumed control in Kabul after the civil war, their decision not to include or negotiate the terms of the new government with other armed groups, including members of the then powerful Hezb-i Islami Mujahidin faction as well as Dostum, undermined the power-sharing arrangements. The marginalization of these groups ultimately resulted in Dostum and
Hezb-i Islami joining forces against Jamiat so as to either put pressure to re-negotiate the power-sharing terms or to overthrow them from power completely. Such pressures forced each military leader to shift their political positions and alliances in ways that would guarantee their survival in the rapidly deteriorating environment. The safest defence was found in aligning along ethnic lines which all sides ultimately did. In an interview with Aydintasbas (2002), General Dostum remarked on this re-alliance in war time by saying,

This goes back to the origins of a political group or party. Once a party or a movement is formed, the leader has to take care of the people surrounding him, his supporters and their families. You have to do whatever is best for their well-being in any given moment. As for me, I have done it to get better rights for my people.

Junbish experienced further pressures as a party after some of its leadership began to ally with groups outside the party, challenging the unity of Junbish. Muhammad Atta Noor, an ethnic Tajik currently affiliated with Jamiat, is a noted example. Noor attempted to overthrow Dostum in 1994 with the support of Jamiat even though Noor and Dostum both shared senior leadership roles inside Junbish (Giustozzi (EM) 2009, 111). Such power struggles and the changing nature of conflict resulted in Junbish becoming more ethnically homogenous with respect to its organizational make-up.

During the war periods, Dostum’s leadership structure was said to consist of military networks at its core which Dostum was able to keep close, not only due to his leadership style and charisma, but also because of his access to both domestic and external resources and networks (Giustozzi 2009, 114). In 1997, Dostum was betrayed by another leading party member, Abdul Malik, who was responsible for inviting the Taliban into the northern areas under the control of Junbish. Aydintasbas (2002) argued that the areas under Dostum’s control,
including the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, was “peaceful and reasonably well-run — a place where women attended school and university and worked in public offices.” Furthermore, Anne Nivat (2006, 204) notes in her research how the women’s branch of Junbish offers free evening courses to women which are always full where they can study a range of subjects including computers and language programs in Turkish and in English. This relative calm was few and far between in the otherwise chaotic Afghanistan of the 1990s, where freedom of mobility for women was extremely regarded and protected under Junbish’s reign.

Afghan’s in the north are said to have taken note of those various betrayals which is thought to have improved Dostum’s standing even though both he and Junbish had lost nearly everything after the Taliban took control of the north in 1998. Once Dostum returned to Afghanistan in April 2001 to fight the Taliban from the frontlines, it is believed that his reputation as a leader and military man was restored among those who had questioned his departure to Turkey after 1998 (Giustozzi 2009, 117). With the fall of the Taliban regime and the return of General Dostum, Dostum found himself in a position to initiate the reorganization of Junbish as a political party which could remain relevant and effective within the new political system. However, as Sakhi (2014, 13) claims, “President Karzai did everything to split Junbish as a party, and many of its loyalists were co-opted by him. Yet, Junbish maintained its comparative coherence as the most organized party in Afghanistan.” Such attempts to weaken and undermine Dostum and his political party from the center have in fact not only strengthened Dostum but also Junbish’s position as well. This was particularly evident in the 2014 presidential elections where Junbish ran highly successful campaigns which mobilized and informed millions of voters — ultimately resulting in the electing of General Dostum to the post of vice-president.
From within, Junbish as a political party does adhere to democratic procedures through elections and rules and regulations. The internal structure of Junbish consists of a Chairman who heads the party, and a 13 member Party Secretariat which oversees the party’s daily affairs. A 55 member Political Committee governs the administrative duties of Junbish where the implementation of policy and agenda setting matters are the responsibility of a 105 member Central Council. In its formalized capacity, Junbish does not have any military ambitions nor any committees and leaders who harbour military objectives. During Junbish’s second party congress, it underwent a critical transition which saw many technocrats and intellectuals get voted into positions that were previously under the control of prominent military leaders and commanders (Peszkowski 2012, 3). In this congress, Junbish took great strides to transform itself from being a military-political party to a party which is centered on political goals and democratic ends. Such efforts of the party, and the initiatives undertaken by its longest serving leader and former head, General Dostum, demonstrates the organized political nature of certain strongmen and their abilities to reform and democratize.

2014 Elections and Participation - Warlord Democracy Building

Elections have served as a key process in the democratization of the Afghan state, with elections determining who holds office both at the district and national levels. Although elections are essential and a necessary component for democratization, they are said to be one of the most challenging undertakings for governments (Miller 2013, 5). Exercising successful elections in post-conflict states present even further challenges and complexities to this process. However, elections which are successful and seen as legitimate can be effective facilitators for
stability which can provide short-term and long-term peace for states in transition. Allowing citizens to elect their government is a central feature to a democratic state which requires political will and participation on the part of all those involved. Even though the merits of post-conflict elections as a process of state-building are debatable, free and fair elections are necessary not only for democracy, but also for the peaceful transition of power needed for states which have experienced conflict.

Elections have become an important feature to most power-sharing agreements which can help facilitate the peace process. Lyons (2002, 216-217) argues, “Post-settlement elections, like any transitional elections, have the purpose of serving as the first step in and foundation for a longer-term process of democratic consolidation through which new rules of the political game are institutionalized.” Essentially, elections allow for groups to compete through the ballot versus the bullet which replaces armed competition for political competition. The 2001 Bonn Agreement specified free and fair elections as a condition to Afghanistan’s political system which is specified through the country’s constitution. Since 2001, Afghanistan has held multiple elections within different levels of government, with three presidential elections undertaken between 2004 and 2014. In these presidential elections, strongmen have played a critical role within the process, with the 2014 elections seeing the most dynamic participation on the part of strongmen and warlords.

Post-conflict elections can help to advance the democratization process and assist with the consolidation of democracy as a system of governance (Kumar 1998, 6). In the case of Afghanistan, elections have acted as an important enabler in the transition of warlords to politicians. The participation of warlords and strongmen in elections has helped to diffuse their power and influence through democratic means. This not only allows for stability within the
political process, but also helps to consolidate democracy in the long-run. Many scholars and policy makers have pointed to the impedimentary nature of warlords and strongmen to both democracy and peace. They view that any political participation by warlords is simply a means for such actors to co-opt the political process for personal gains and illegitimate ends using democratic channels such as elections. I argue instead, that ‘warlord politics’ and the participation of strongmen in Afghanistan’s elections is actually more complex than most observers claim, and have found that certain warlords have been facilitators to the political process which has contributed to the overall democratization of the state. It is of course difficult to accurately determine and gauge if indeed leaders in post-conflict societies — or any other society for that matter — are actually “democrats.” However, examining the actions and interactions of such leaders to a democratic political process, including state institutions, can provide valuable insights with respect to the relationship between warlords and democracy.

Ultimately, a goal for post-conflict states should be to develop political avenues which encourage and reward those who participate legally and democratically while outlawing individuals who continue to use force and resort to violence.

This section will address Afghanistan’s election process with a specific focus on the 2014 presidential elections. As Miller (2013) has noted, the 2014 presidential elections is seen as the most important political event to date regarding Afghanistan’s transition to democracy. These elections were a test for the country and its ability to successfully, and peacefully, transfer political power. Although the elections ultimately proved peaceful, allegations of fraud existed which had the potential to derail the country’s political process and result in violence. However, a unity government of sorts was created on September 21, 2014 to avoid any potential fallout where a power-sharing agreement between the parties of Dr. Ashraf Ghani and Dr. Abdullah
Abdullah was signed. What is significant regarding these allegations of fraud and voter coercion was that such allegations were not directed at any of the ‘major warlords,’ but in fact, such allegation were directed at the political elites on both sides as well as members of President Karzai’s government. This fact therefore challenges the notion that such figures are capable of only ruling through force, coercion and illegalities whereby the warlord is responsible for the country’s many political problems. These elections instead signified the transformative nature of ‘warlord politics’ and demonstrated that warlord figures can participate in democracy rather effectively. Additionally, it was evident through these elections that some Afghan strongmen are quite politically sophisticated in their approaches to democracy where they were effective in their abilities to communicate with large segments of the population — encouraging and mobilizing millions to participate in the democratic process. Three particular areas which signify direct warlord involvement with democracy include: policy and participation involving elections; coalition building and unification towards candidates; and the political campaigning process. These three areas will be examined in further detail.

**Policy and Participation**

The first presidential elections which took place after the post-conflict period in 2001 was outlined during the *Bonn Agreement* which stated that presidential elections be held in three years’ time after a period in which Hamid Karzai would head the interim government. The 2004 presidential elections were the county’s first which saw President Karzai also run as a candidate who ultimately won, becoming the country’s first elected leader. These elections also witnessed the participation of strongmen who played an instrumental role as important actors particularly in
the beginning years of the country’s political development. In the immediate post-war period, many Afghans still only identified with the ‘major warlords’ which meant that they still retained support among the people. As De Zeeuw (2008, 12) notes, the successful transformation of armed non-state actors into peaceful political players first require a behavioural or attitudinal change on the part of these actors. In the 2004 presidential elections, many Afghan strongmen displayed a change in their approach to politics and society where they came to better understand democracy and peaceful political competition. Furthermore, it can be argued that there was a realization on the part of many of these strongmen who understood that their legitimate power would be increasingly defined by their ability to succeed in elections.

The 2004 elections included ‘major warlords’ who ran as candidates against President Karzai and others. Mohammad Mohaqiq and Rashid Dostum were among the major figures of the war period that stood in these elections. This was an important moment for both of these men who had to organize politically and compete through an elections process. Although Mohaqiq and Dostum lost to the incumbent President Karzai, nevertheless both of these men were in the top four out of a possible of eighteen candidates. Together, Mohaqiq and Dostum received well over 20% of the votes cast even with allegations of widespread fraud in favour of President Karzai. During these elections, no cases of coercion or violence were reported against these warlords with respect to forced voting or fraud, nor did these men and their supporters’ revolt after losing the elections. As Giustozzi (2012, 162 Astri) has noted, intimidation and threats by armed non-state groups were actually quite minimal and were not as widespread as initially expected. Therefore with these elections, the participation of warlords demonstrated that strongmen can contest power through a political process and do not resort to violence after their loss — an important indicator for democratization. Also, a further positive outcome of their
participation was that it reinforced democracy to the millions of Afghans that voted which showed that even past military figures, with considerable power, are able to accept democracy and recognize elections as a means to political legitimacy.

Strongmen continued to be active, and remained critical, to the presidential elections in both 2009 and 2014. This active involvement enforced political competition to be contested through state institutions where warlords were responsible for encouraging their constituents to mobilize and vote. This symbolized an important transition in warlord attitudes regarding politics and democratic participation. Such participation on the part of warlords — both as candidates and representatives — strengthened Afghanistan’s political process since it consolidated political institutions and perception regarding democracy as a system of governance. The view of exploitation or cooptation on the part of warlords who participate in elections has been understood as a means of gaining control over “political power and economic resources” without them having to compete through armed violence (Joshi 2010, 833). Although such views are plausible and do hold water in many contexts, it remains important to mention that such competition for state resources has fundamentally been the purpose of politics in all states, including established democracies.

For the 2009 presidential elections, warlords and strongmen provided political support to President Karzai rather than running as candidates themselves. The ‘major warlords’ arguably were co-opted by Karzai through alliance making and promises of political positions in return for political support. Such support by strongmen certainly helped President Karzai receive the votes necessary for his re-elections. His choice of running mates demonstrated his dependence on various regional leaders during these elections. Strongmen such as Mohaqiq and Khan were responsible for delivering large blocks of votes to Karzai in 2009. Such back-deal politicking
proved favourable were President Karzai was able to secure 49% of the votes in the first round of elections, ultimately resulting in his presidency.

The role of strongmen and warlords in the 2014 presidential elections was perhaps the most intense and active participation of warlords ever witnessed in Afghan elections. These elections signified the first peaceful transfer of political power in Afghanistan’s history. Undoubtedly, the campaigning efforts of Dostum, Mohaqiq and Khan, who ran as significant contenders, helped increase the voting rate and enthusiasm around these elections. The relative success of the elections can also be attributed to the political manner in which warlords peacefully and skilfully approached not only voters, but also their willingness to make political compromises with former rival political figures. The first round of the 2014 presidential elections witnessed over 7 million people cast their votes — nearly 60% of all eligible voters. This was significant in a country which still experiences instability and insecurity, and where its infrastructure is lacking in many areas of the country which made voting inaccessible for large segments of the population. The second round of elections equally experienced a high rate of voter turnout which confirmed the people’s aspiration for democracy. These high voter turnouts were an extension of those warlords who participated as well since some of the largest and most successful campaign rallies were in the regions and provinces where the strongmen remain most influential. In many of these political rallies, pictures and slogans of strongmen, who ran as vice-presidents, were more predominate then even the presidential candidates themselves — reflecting the continued significance of strongmen in Afghan politics.

As not all warlords are created equal, their participation and effectiveness in these elections also varied in terms of their ability to mobilize the public and generate votes. The strongmen Ismail Khan ran as a vice-presidential candidate alongside Abdul Rasul Sayyaf who is
a well-known Mujahidin commander with alleged ties to powerful militias. Sayyaf and Khan campaigned on a religious centered platform with strong political references to past resistances. Their political platform raised images and symbols of heroism of the 1980s Mujahidin era which they argued, if elected, they would continue to safeguard and promote. They also promised to respect the sacrifices made by the people which appealed to the older and more conservative Afghan voter base. Although they did not receive enough votes to move into the second round of elections, they nonetheless were able to gain nearly half a million votes. The participation of Khan and Sayyaf implied a ‘rebel-to-party transformation’ where their unsuccessful bids to the presidency did not result in their revolt as Sayyaf and others promised to uphold and respect the results of a free and fair elections. Their adherence to the democratic process and their assurance not to spoil the elections were found to be true. The two leading candidates in the 2014 presidential elections, Dr. Ghani and Dr. Abdullah, both had prominent strongmen as their vice presidential running mates. Although such alliances were strategic in their ethnic compositions, ethnicity did not play as big a role as was expected. The relative success of these elections were based in part to the policies put forth by leading candidates as well as the participation of strongmen who were responsible for mobilizing large segments of the voter base.

**Vice Presidents, Running Mates and Coalitions**

The 2014 presidential elections proved to be a critical test for Afghanistan on its road towards democratic politics. In these elections, there was an unprecedented degree of bargaining and negotiations on the part of the political elites and strongmen during the tense nominations period. In regards to democratization and the role of coalitions in the European experience, Tilly
(1975, 28) noted, “The very presence of multiple contenders for power, mutually aware and relatively equal in strength promoted a process of consolidation by means of shifting coalitions among geographically concentrated elites.” This bargaining on the part of political elites and strongmen from different regions and of different backgrounds culminated into ‘unlikely alliances’ as was noted, yet such coalition were politically strategic and expedient which consolidated the political process as identified by Tilly. Political alliances and coalitions with warlords and strongmen were a necessary component to the elections process which consolidated and unified a diverse range of political actors, including former rivals who had once engaged in armed politics. As noted by the International Crisis Group (2014, 7), political alliances in these elections “represented a political detente, to some extent, between factions that had engaged in bitter warfare during the 1990s.” Therefore alliance making and coalitions demonstrated political compromise among these different factions and political groups which played a peaceful and constructive role in the political process.

Running mates in the form of strongmen also strengthened the composition of the teams since they brought valuable networks to the presidential candidates, which to a degree, maximized on the ethnic diversity of the country. These alliances and coalitions reflected the fluid nature not only of Afghan politics, but also the fluidity and unpredictability of post-conflict elections in general. As Sakhi (2014, 5) explains, “Nearly all Afghan political actors, in government and opposition alike, attempted to improve their bargaining power, either through the establishment of new political forums or by forging new alliances.” A total of 27 candidates formally filed their nominations with the Independent Election Commission of Afghanistan (IEC) where candidate-nominations ranged from ministry technocrats to medical doctors, tribal families to Mujahidin leaders, and from academics to warlords. The formal nominations process
took place in Kabul, resulting in an impressive showcase of power and alliances-making which revealed Afghanistan’s dynamic elections process and the great stakes for many in these elections. As outlined in Afghanistan’s Constitution, the president must select a first and second vice president who joins the presidential ticket as running mates. In Afghanistan’s multi-identity and multi-layered nature, two running mates can be essential for assisting in the balancing of power in regards to ethnicity and region since the president can select, among the country’s many different groups, two vice presidents which serve with him in the highest office.

The choice of two vice-presidents allows for concerns of grievances and representation to be addressed for large segments of the population which can provide greater political stability while easing tensions. In addition, two vice-presidents can advance the chances for a likely win or outright majority in the first round of elections due to consensus building, ultimately contributing to the overall success of the voting process. This is particularly important for post-conflict states since political fragmentation is common and the chances of spoiling the results are greater. Coalition and consensus building through a formal political process is not identified with warlordism or ‘warlord politics.’ As McCormick and Fritz (2009, 103) note,

The job of a ‘warlord’ is a uniquely singular position. It is not a position that is shared with others, nor is the kind of individual attracted to the job generally the sharing type. The very nature of a coalition, in which gains from trade are achieved among coalition partners, is antithetical to the winner-take-all character of warlord politics. And yet coalitions are a regular empirical feature of the warlord game in which three or more players are (actively or tacitly) competing for control over a given political space. When the players in this game enter into a coalition they do so because each can achieve more by forming a tactical alliance than they can by continuing to operate on their own.
For McCormick and Fritz, a coalition among warlords therefore signifies a “tactical alliance” to contain or dominate those competitors who are a threat and possible challenger to the positions of a warlord. The coalition making between warlords and strongmen in Afghanistan was not so much of alliances between warlords, but rather warlords who ‘demilitarized’ their position and politics by joining candidates not associated to armed politics. This was evident in the composition of the two leading teams which did not have warlords as their central candidate.

De Zeeuw’s (2008) notion of ‘rebel-to-party transformation,’ where political contestation replaces military contestation, was exemplified through the coalitions and political alliances produced in the Afghan elections. Not only was armed politics not employed as a means to political power, but warlords such as Khan and Mohaqiq, who did not win in these elections, forfeited some of their coercive abilities and power after their unsuccessful bids. Therefore the political process was able to deliver a relatively successful transition of power which witnessed various strongmen become weaker in their overall capacities. The peaceful and diplomatic approach taken in these elections by warlords was a departure from past attempts at claiming power and authority through warfare and armed politics. As a result, the strategic choice of running mates and political compromises in these elections was an important feature for the democratization of the state. Afghanistan demonstrated that the participation of warlords and strongmen in post-conflict elections can be expected, and has shown that warlords are able to provide stability in this process. In Afghanistan, because electoral losses did not result in violence, the political process in effect strengthened and further consolidated. Strongmen and warlords proved that they are capable of running for political office through a democratic process where they participate in strategic politicking to increase their chances on being elected. The
importance of coalitions and alliances-making also was recognized in these elections which can help to further explain the democratization of post-conflict states.

Coalitions help unite differing political parties, persons and factions around common agendas and political goals while also broadening their appeal and voter base. Coalitions help increase political influence while consolidating resources which in turn provides greater political capacity than could be achieved without the coalition (O’Day 2004). In the immediate 2001 period, coalitions were reflective of the alliances of the war period, particularly with the northern factions. However, as time progressed and political objectives changed, so did these alliances. For example, strongmen from the Northern Alliance acted as one block beginning from the 2001 Bonn Agreements up until the 2004 elections. However, as Afghanistan’s politics evolved, and with Karzai courting different strongmen accordingly, these alliances shifted and evolved as a result. With regards to Afghan warlords, it is understood that Karzai was playing one against the other in an effort to centralize his own power while at the same time attempting to weaken those that challenged his position in the peripheries. This was true for both the 2004 and 2009 presidential elections which Karzai won, in large part, due to his ability to maneuver with and against regional strongmen who remained influential. Prior to the 2014 elections, Afghan political actors and elites were divided into two groups — the opposition and the pro-government forces (Sakhi 2014, 7). The coalition building witnessed in the 2014 presidential elections reflected the complicated nature of post-conflict societies where former military figures and strongmen in some incidents were seen to wield more power than some institutions. After the first round of elections, and into the run-off, it appeared that some of the old Mujahidin forces and other power-holders joined Abdullah’s political team while the technocrats and influential Pashtun groups came to support Ghani.
Dr. Ashraf Ghani, a western educated academic and former Afghan finance minister, chose as his first vice president, Abdul Rashid Dostum, and Sarwar Danish, as his second. In this ticket, Dostum clearly was the strongman with arguably the greatest experience and history with respect to Afghan politics. Dostum was a central figure in the overthrow of the Taliban and also played a significant role in the fall of the communist regime in 1992. Dostum, who is an ethnic Uzbek, once commanded the largest and most powerful militia which was an arm of the communist government under President Najibullah. Centred in the north, Dostum’s usual alliances and military partnerships consisted of Tajiks and Hazaras who were also underrepresented in Pashtun-dominant governments of the past. A union between Uzbeks, Tajiks and Hazaras makes an absolute majority in terms of the country’s population and therefore a unity of these three groups has acted to hedge Pashtun dominance during the Taliban era. Therefore the alliance between Ghani, an ethnic Pashtuns, and Dostum, and ethnic Uzbek, was seen as a departure from the traditional ‘northern alliances’ where the focus instead was centered on coalescing to provide for a broader political front for contesting these elections. General Dostum offered the force of power and tradition still very much important in Afghan society, while Ashraf Ghani was very much seen as the reformer and technocratic expert much desired in underdeveloped states. Dr. Ghani noted the differences that exist between someone like himself and General Dostum. In an interview with Jeffrey Stern (2014), Ghani stated,

We develop sentiments that we are only going to work with people like us. But you don’t build up a nation by working with people like you. You overcome a history of conflict by reaching out to people very much unlike you. If we are going to have peace, we’re going to have on our team people who understand war.
Dr. Ghani had been known for challenging the authority of strongmen when he was in government. However, he seemed to have matured in his position after realizing the workings of post-conflict Afghanistan and the fact that many of these strongmen had a history inside the country which Dr. Ghani could not match. In regards to General Dostum, his alliance with Dr. Ghani was also calculated and political where Dostum understood the importance of building a broader coalition for election purposes. General Dostum further claimed that if he had joined his old political alliances such as Dr. Abdullah and other former Northern Alliances leaders, he believed such coalitions would have split the county in half based on old north-south divides.

Ashraf Ghani’s political appeal as a candidate benefited from an alliance with General Dostum. Dr. Ghani capitalized on Dostum’s strength and resilience, not to mention, his proven ability to deliver millions of votes. It is important to note that once the Ghani-Dostum ticket was announced, Ghani started to climb in all major surveys and polls (Stern 2014). Additionally, Ghani’s partnership with General Dostum would also provide a strategic link and access to Dostum’s political party, Junbish, which is one of the best organized and most experienced political parties in the country. The association with Junbish was an asset during the campaigning process which helped to mobilize supporters and volunteers, as well as to raise funds and to make full use of the political channels and connections which Junbish had already established. Sakhi (2014, 15) notes, that this alliance was seen as a “dramatic political shift” for Junbish from traditional allies of the past, where Dr. Ghani was “perceived largely as anti-warlord.” Coalition building in post-conflict states is a complex procedure, with many factors to consider and overcome. However, the complexity, and necessity, is very much similar to coalitions that may be found in established democracies. Nonetheless, this ‘unlikely alliance’ not only exemplified the nature of ‘warlord politics,’ but also demonstrated how successful such
alliances-making can be. The strongman-technocrat alliance was complemented with the choice of Sarwar Danish who is a Hazara bureaucrat and academic with political connections to influential Hazara leader Karim Khalili. This provided a powerful and diverse front which broadened the appeal of Dr. Ghani’s electoral ticket. Various other personalities and groups joined this team as well, such as Sayed Mansur Naderi, the leader of the Tajik-Ismaili community who has had past military alliances with General Dostum and Ahmad Zia Massoud, the brother of the late Ahmad Shah Massoud, a national figure from the resistance against the Soviets.

Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, a former Afghan foreign minister and long-time spokesperson for the Northern Alliance, placed first in the first round of elections with 45% of the votes. His nearest rival-candidate, Dr. Ghani, received 32% of the votes which secured both men a place in the second round. As such, the second round of elections resulted in many re-alliances among leading candidates who stood to join and form electoral coalitions for the second round. As Sakhi (2014, 18) rightfully notes, Dr. Abdullah was better positioned to contest the 2014 presidential elections when compared to other leading candidates because of his experience in past presidential elections as well as his long involvement in Afghan politics. This was true for the first round of elections where Dr. Abdullah was significantly ahead of all other candidates in the final vote tally. This successful first round was a testament to Dr. Abdullah’s ability to mobilize voters and the potential capacity of himself and his running mates to connect with voters. Abdullah selected Mohammad Khan as his first vice president who is a Pashtun with political ties to the Hezb-i-Islami groups. He chose Hazara strongman and politician, Mohammad Mohaqiq as his second vice president. His candidacy also reflected the broad attempts by various candidates to reach an ethnic plurality for the sake of widening their appeal.
Dr. Abdullah had the most experience in conducting and participating in presidential elections since he ran a successful campaign in 2009 against Karzai with Dr. Abdullah almost winning. In addition, Dr. Abdullah had been the lead opposition figure during Karzai’s presidency which allowed him to be a key player in various political circles. This allowed him to establish valuable political ties and networks and to also develop expertise which proved useful in the campaigning process.

Dr. Abdullah is associated with the Tajik ethnic group and is seen as a seasoned politician with many decades of experience in Afghan politics. In comparison, his second vice-president, Mohammad Mohaqiq, has been involved as a commander in Afghanistan’s decades of conflicts where he has been a champion of Hazara rights which is the community he most draws his support from. Mohaqiq has transitioned successfully from a military man to a politician in the post-conflict period which is evident with his involvement in Afghan politics including his third place finish in the 2004 presidential elections. The abuse of the Hazaras was particularly brutal under the Taliban who violently repressed this community. Therefore Mohaqiq’s alliance with various other northern groups against the Taliban was only natural which provided important security and political guarantees for him and his people. During the 2014 election campaigning process, Mohaqiq addressed a large election rally in the Pashtun dominated province of Kandahar which would have been impossible a decade earlier in this former Taliban stronghold. Mohaqiq’s promise of development and the rule of law were well received which was also a bold step on his part to address past adversaries in a former hostile region. Not only did this signify an attitudinal change among the Kandaharis towards the Hazaras, but also showed that ethnic politics in Afghanistan has lessened. In regard to the alliance between Dr. Abdullah and Mohaqiq, Sakhi (2014, 18) notes, “Mohaqq has much in common with Abdullah on substantive
issues such as decentralization, the institutionalization of political pluralism and the development of democratic institutions.” As a result, the alliance between the two men centered on important principles of democracy and political vision where these candidates had similar political views which was a unifying factor in their partnership. Therefore, strongmen like Mohaqiq had a more sophisticated understanding of democracy and state-building then is normally equated with warlords and warlordism. With the 2014 elections, Afghan warlords and strongmen demonstrated their abilities to engage with democratic politics where coalition building and political compromise were essential to their success.

A final significant alliance that was reached in these elections was that of Abdul Rasul Sayyaf, a powerful warlord and former influential Pashtun Mujahidin leader. His choice of first vice president was strongman Ismail Khan from Herat, and Abdul Urfan, a religious scholar of Uzbek origin. This alliance of Pashtun-Tajik-Uzbek was based around a conservative platform with strong religious appeals and deep rooted symbols reflecting the country’s past Mujahidin era. Both Sayyaf and Khan were leading figures during the time of the resistance against the Soviets where they continued to lead significant militias and armed groups in the post-conflict period. Although they were not as well organized and politically experienced as compared to some of the other leading candidates, this alliance nevertheless was able to tailor to Afghanistan’s conservatives base which helped this team come in fourth place with half a million votes. Both Sayyaf and Khan have been widely reported as significant warlords. Again however, as this case exemplifies, their participation in these elections indicates that these men were not interested in armed politics and instead were willing to participate in a democratic process. Not only did they express their support for democracy and the importance of voting, they did not spoil the political process after the results. This candidacy again demonstrated that
warlords can undertake democratic change and participate in the process of elections whereby their actions can help, in some ways, to strengthen Afghanistan’s overall attempts to democratize.

**Warlords and Political-Electoral Campaigning**

The political campaigns for the 2014 presidential elections were the most organized and sophisticated campaigning process ever undertaken in Afghanistan. The scope and organization of these campaigns were exceptional, especially for a post-conflict Afghanistan, where the range of tools and mediums used to communicate to the voting public had never before been attempted in Afghan politics. Candidate’s use of the media, internet, radio and social networking helped mobilize and inform large segments of the voting public which inspired enthusiasm for these elections and the democratic process. This excitement and exposure to different means of communication and information regarding elections and the political process does have the potential to instil democratic ideals and principles to wide reaches of the public. It is argued that “Campaigns can affect what voters know, whether they will vote, whom they will vote for, and why they will vote for that person” (Brady, Johnston and Sides 2006, 18). The organizational capacity of the campaigns by leading candidates and their teams were significant to this process, particularly because Afghanistan had never before witnessed such political competition between candidates on peaceful and democratic terms that also relied heavily on the public’s involvement. Candidates and their teams repeatedly encouraged citizens to vote and to exercise their democratic rights.
The campaigning process for these elections began two months prior to the date of voting which was held in April of 2014. In this two month period, candidates connected to voters and provided policy platforms on a range of topics and issues. A televised debate between leading candidates also took place which focused on important concerns of the country from security and corruption to the economy and international relations. A nation-wide poll conducted by Washington-based *Glevum Associates* found that 11% of the public were still undecided regarding whom to support in these elections, but had both Dr. Ghani and Dr. Abdullah leading with 29% and 25% respectively (*Glevum Associates* 2013, 15). The nearest candidates after these two all polled below 10% percent in terms of popularity, which indicated that there were yet many undecided voters who would be decisive to the final results. Therefore, extensive campaigning took place in all 34 provinces of the country, predominantly by the teams of Dr. Ghani and Dr. Abdullah, who aggressively set out to present their ideas and messages to their supporters and the voters yet undecided.

Extensive political engagement on the scale witnessed in the 2014 campaigning process was not common for Afghanistan, particularly because of its instability and the dangers posed to large gatherings. Furthermore, Afghanistan lacks sufficient institutions and organizations that specialize in political outreach programs and public relations, where instead, a culture of conflict has ruled over political dialogue for many decades. The leading candidates, Dr. Ghani and Dr. Abdullah, were assumed to have hired western firms which administered and consulted the teams’ public relations programs. With respect to the role of the strongmen in these elections, the largest and most successful of these campaigns and political rallies took place in cities and provinces where the strongmen in discussion have the greatest public support. These vice-presidential strongmen were not only responsible for organizing and financing these campaigns
and rallies, but were also responsible for setting the political agenda and engaging in issue based politics that were seen as important to their constituents. A sophisticated level of organizational structure and networks were seen to exist in these campaigns with managers and hired consultants as well as grassroots volunteers who coordinated out of district offices where they were responsible for local canvassing and reaching voters. Again, some of the largest and most well-organized campaign rallies occurred due to the support of strongmen who were able to effectively mobilize constituents and votes around their positions. Azam Ahmed (2014) acknowledges the influence of strongmen in these campaigns from a rally he witnessed in the province of Kunduz. Ahmed noted,

> When the presidential candidate Ashraf Ghani took the stage this month before more than 15,000 people in the northern province of Kunduz, his speech about fighting corruption and the need for unity and security was met with polite applause. Then his running mate, the warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum, an ethnic Uzbek, took the stage. The crowd erupted, with his supporters pressing to the edge of a 10-foot-deep trench dug to keep them from rushing the dais. In effect, Mr. Ghani, a multilingual technocrat with a doctorate from Columbia University who is considered a front-runner, was relegated to being the warm-up act for his vice-presidential candidate.

Throughout the 2014 campaigning process, warlords and strongmen were able to mobilize and bring together large segments of the population in an attempt to present their agendas and to organize their voter-base. This is yet another area where the role of strongmen helped facilitate the political process through increased participation around the elections process, which in the long run, supports in the democratization of the state. Warlord engagement with the public and constituents during the campaigning cycle again exemplifies the transformative role of these past
armed actors who instead contested their position and legitimacy through a political process involving elections. Therefore, it is evident that the campaigning process in the 2014 presidential elections further demonstrated a shift in ‘warlord politics’ where their participation contributed to the democratic process and to the relative success of these elections.

Campaigning for elections is a vital component of the political process in established democracies, where campaigning not only assists in the democratic process, but more importantly, campaigning is one of the most important mediums for engaging citizens and disseminating the political message. Engaged campaigning provides many positive benefits, including more informed voters and higher voter turnouts. However, the exact significance of political campaigns in post-conflict elections is less clear where this connection has not been extensively established. Nevertheless, political campaigns do play a role for helping to disseminate information while creating an atmosphere political awareness and political engagement — even in post-conflict states. For example, in the case of Afghanistan’s 2014 presidential elections, it is clear that campaigns by leading candidates and strongmen played a critical role with regards to the mobilization of people and higher voter turnouts. Specifically, the candidates who spent the most on their campaigns, notably Dr. Ghani and Dr. Abdullah, where not only recognized for making use of the most effective campaign tools and strategies, but both candidates as a result received the most votes cast. It was found that the leading candidates and their teams, particularly from Dr. Ghani and Dr. Abdullah camps, “placed nearly double the number of advertisements than others candidates in the mainstream media” (EU Election Assessment Team 2014, 5).

The political campaigns of the two leading candidates resulted in the largest public rallies and gatherings with the most registered volunteers and supporters. Although Article 5 of the
Afghan Election Law requires that “The mass media shall equally, fairly and impartially broadcast and publish candidates’ platforms, comments, and objectives,” Dr. Ghani and Dr. Abdullah nonetheless disproportionately received the most media attention and coverage both nationally and internationally. This is attributed to their leads in both the polls and surveys but also to the effectiveness of their campaigns. For these reason, political campaigns did play an important function in the Afghan elections including providing information on policy and delivering the message of democracy. More importantly, through these political campaigns, an atmosphere of democratic politics and political competition was created which was vital for post-conflict Afghanistan. This allowed for political contestation in Afghanistan to move away from armed violence which in effect contributes to the long term institutionalization and democratization of the state. As was reported by the International Crisis Groups (2014, 23), violence between the presidential contenders and their teams “remained comparatively rare” during the elections process.

In Afghanistan, public rallies or ‘majlis,’ which is the equivalent to political and social gatherings, was popular among the candidates due to their ability to mobilize and bring together large segments of the population. These political rallies drew in tens of thousands of people all around the country and took place in all major Afghan cities. Campaign rallies helped channel political messages directly to supporters and potential voters which allowed Afghans to see and hear various candidates’ policy objectives and goals. For example, Dr. Abdullah, with his two vice presidents, outlined his position on women’s rights, rule of law and political reform at his first rally in Kabul where he also stressed the importance of free and fair elections for Afghanistan’s democracy (Clark 2014, 4). In addition to political rallies, candidates utilized pamphlets and televised advertisements to reach voters and to present their policies. Social
media was also a useful platform for engaging the public and sharing information and highlights from the campaigns which helped reach a wider audience in different parts of the country.

Both Dr. Ghani and Dr. Abdullah each had over 350,000 followers on Facebook and tens of thousands of followers on Twitter during the 2014 elections. Such use of social media as a platform for connecting voters and supporters had never before been witnessed in Afghan politics. Strongmen and warlords were also engaged with social media where they provided regular updates and announcements of anticipated public rallies and events. Billboards and large picture advertisements were also popular among the candidates and could be found in all major cities and towns in the country. Billboards were the most peculiar of campaigning methods since each billboard was specifically personalized and tailored to reflect candidates and their teams which corresponded with different groups and segments of society where pictures of leaders had to be balanced with the city and region’s socio-political history due to the legacy of war and past animosities (Clark 2014, 3). For example, Dr. Abdullah’s team contained vice presidents who were associated to the political parties of Hizb-i Wahdat-e Islami and Hizb-i Islami, where Dr. Abdullah himself is connected to Jamiat-i Islami — all bitter rivals in one way or another during Afghanistan’s violent civil war in the 1990s. Therefore campaign posters and billboards would contain certain people and past leaders in one constituency which could not be advertised in others due to the public’s sensitives around these issues. This reflected the complex and complicated nature of post-conflict societies and their politics, and the controlled approaches needed when pushing for political change and democratization so as not to instigate past rivalries.

Dr. Ashraf Ghani was announced as the new President of Afghanistan by the Independent Election Commission on September 21, 2014, after months of political deadlock. Although both
candidates and their teams’ political strategies were executed remarkably for a post-conflict state, it seems that Dr. Ghani was more successful at reaching the wider Afghan public and gaining their votes. Hamdullah Mohib (2014), a senior campaign manager for Dr. Ghani’s teams summarized the reasons for their success during the campaigning process. Mohib stated,

Our victory was built on the principles that would make a campaign work anywhere: We had a broad issue-driven agenda with support of political, tribal and, most importantly, religious leaders. We ran an inclusive campaign that energized young people and women. We employed a comprehensive and inclusive communication and outreach strategy, using national media outlets, audio and visual ads, mobile technology. We reached out to the tens of thousands of remote villages across the country. And we used targeted, data-driven messaging via social media, mobile phones, and person-to-person contacts to get the vote.

The campaign strategies employed were a critical component to these elections and helped communicate political awareness and democracy for millions of Afghans. Campaigns not only served for the peaceful transfer of political power, but also established important democratic principles such as peaceful assembly, political participation and awareness, public consultation, and presenting and organizing policies. Furthermore, these elections and campaigns provided a level of political competition and discourse which had been missing in political life in Afghanistan. To see strongmen of all stripes engage with the public through rallies and debates was a positive step for Afghan democracy. In addition, the engagement of warlords also signified their transition and transformation into democratic politics which they displayed in these elections. Coercion and violence were not instrumentalized nor employed as a means for influencing the public and to win votes. Instead, effective communication strategies, mobilized voters, democratic awareness, and political contestation were the important ideals to the presidency and to political power. The evolution of Afghanistan’s political discourse was
evident with these elections where the warlord and the strongmen played a central role in this process.
Chapter 5 - Conclusion: Can Democracies Emerge through Warlords?

The warlord-democracy nexus is not the ideal or desired process for democratization in post-conflict states. However, states which are attempting to democratize after war may be subject to such a process especially when strongmen emerge, or remain, as powerful actors after the war. Wantchekon (2004, 18) argues that the need for both political order and stability as factors which drive post-war societies to democratize. Warlords and strongmen have shown to remain powerful in their capacities in many contexts, where in Afghanistan, the ‘major warlords’ provided both political and military stability. In the case of Afghanistan, not only did warlords remain influential, but in most cases, they maintained their legitimacy with the masses and remained socially and politically connected within their communities. This served as a powerful asset which gave strongmen important clout both inside and against the state. As Khalilzad (2010) noted, political conditions often enter a ‘warlord phase’ with the ending of conflict, where such a phase was witnessed in Afghanistan post-2001. This study has attempted to examine the relationships between warlords and strongmen to the political process to provide insight into the role of strongmen in the democratization of the state and to draw conclusion on whether or not they can be facilitators and sources for democracy. Through extensive research, this study concludes that in fact strongmen in the post-conflict period did engage in ways with democracy which ultimately consolidated democratic politics for Afghanistan.

The overall relationship between warlords in Afghanistan to democracy has not always been ‘democratic’ without its problems, nor has it moved in a linear fashion. For a society that has been inflicted with some of the most violent forms of conflicts in recent decades, political stability and democratization was not anticipated to be realized quickly and without struggle.
The vilified persona of Afghan strongmen, as well as the violent contexts in which they developed, presented these figures as being strictly antithetical to the state, let alone contributing to the building of the state’s democracy. An important consideration for scholars of state formation and democratization must be to recognize that “Warlords are not irrational anarchists, but an alternative form of governance system” which emerge in periods of state and institutional collapse (Jackson 2003, 132). Therefore the reactions of strongmen are not always obvious but are seen to develop in accordance with the context they emerge from. In Afghanistan, warlords became the protectors of their region or communities in time of conflict and providers many services in place of missing government functions. Therefore the relative military protections which warlords afforded, and their receptive nature to their people, provided them with lasting legitimacy and support which has translated into the post-conflict period. Although their presence did challenge the state’s authority in many areas, their role in the political process has not been so damaging, especially given that warlords were in a position to spoil or exploit their continued hold over the means of violence more forcefully than was witnessed.

Institutional breakdown and insecurity result in conditions which give rise to ‘warlord politics.’ This in effect results in a competitive struggle between those that have coercive abilities and who are ambitious, where the most powerful and skillful of the warlords are the ones most resourceful and adaptive to change. In the Afghan context, these struggles have more often than not been played out in the battlefield, where such struggles have transitioned into the political space created in the post-conflict period. Through a historical political analysis, Tilly (2004 34-35) found that paths to democracy were realized through “vigorous political contestation.” In reference to Switzerland after 1848, Tilly (2004, 177) argued that, “Switzerland had switched from violent militia-based politics” to a political system which was
more democratic with active “social movements, strikes, and election campaigns.” Therefore in the European experience, armed politics had a direct and indirect link with the development of democracies. The warlord-democracy nexus experienced in Afghanistan also demonstrates the connections between warlords to democracy and how ‘militia-based politics’ or ‘warlord politics’ resulted in improved forms of democratic politics. It is evident that warlords have mobilized constituents during Afghanistan’s elections, built political coalitions to contest rival candidates, and established political parties — fostering democratic norms and ideals within society which previously did not exist. As Rubin (2004, 165) states, “The process of state formation is often quite violent and messy” where most states have not been formed in a vacuum through peace and stability. Instead, the overwhelming majority of states have experienced violent conflict and political disorder on their paths towards democracy. Afghanistan’s experience has shown to be no different.

With Afghanistan’s first peaceful transfer of political power, the country is still a long ways from fully realizing peace and political stability. As a country that has recently emerged from the ashes of violent war, attempts are being made to strengthen governance and democracy while providing security in all parts of the country. In less than forty years, Afghanistan has been under the rule of a monarchy, a communist government, a Mujahidin government, a Taliban government, and now, a government that is adhering to both the tenants of Islam and democracy. These diverse and even contradictory forms of past government and political structures have nonetheless complicated the socio-political fabric of Afghan society where its understandings of government and politics contrast from generation to generation. Very few nations in modern times have had to endure such radical and eradicate changes with respect to its
politics, where such changes have occurred through violence which has forced the Afghan state to suffer perpetual instability.

Because of these radical occurrences and the violent nature of Afghan politics, what was left of the Afghan state and government functions become extremely weakened, or in most cases, ceased to exist. This breakdown of institutions and the government structures itself, removed the state’s ability to rule and provide services where such breakdowns also shifted the state’s monopoly over its legitimate use of force from state entities to non-state actors. It was therefore in this climate of state collapse which produced and allowed strongmen and warlords to rise and to take responsibility over state functions, with security being most important. This political vacuum, in essence, was filled by strongmen with extensive military background who stemmed from all ethnics groups of the country and who became natural heirs to their regions and bases of support. Jackson (2003, 133) correctly notes, “A characteristic of most fragmenting states is a devolution of power from the centre to the local level. As state agents of coercion (army and police) cease to function, local people act on their own behalf to provide security.” Therefore in situations of societal breakdown, it has been the strongmen and warlords who have had to provide some forms of security and stability. These ‘provisions’ and legitimacy were an extension of their coercive abilities and systems of patronage which some warlords exerted, were some of the ‘major warlords’ also displayed charismatic and traditional leadership styles which allowed them to remain even more influential. As multiple regimes came and went, the Afghan strongmen also evolved with the changing environment and remained key actors in the changing political process. Their impact was not only witnessed on the battlefield, but their effects on state building and the democratization of Afghanistan has also been witnessed. Counterintuitive as it may seem, strongmen and warlords have facilitated and consolidated the democratic process
in significant ways from political compromise to instilling political competition through electoral politics and the mobilization of the public.

Those deemed warlords, however, have not all been beneficial to the democratization of the state where their interactions with these efforts have varied. It is unquestionable that some hindered and spoiled the political process or did exploit their positions for person gains and to increase their power and authority. It is also clear however that some figures such as Dostum and Mohaqiq have attempted to reposition their politics towards democratic ends, where the most successful of them have participated and contested in democracy. Even though Dostum, Mohaqiq and Khan had the ability to exert force in many cases, including in the 2014 presidential elections, they did not challenge the principles of democracy in any great way through their actions or inactions. In addition, those who lost in the elections, beginning in 2004, have not resorted to violence as expected — indicating their ability to accept defeat and to not spoil the process. With respect to this issue of election loss, Democracy Web states,

For democracy to work, everyone must agree to accept the results of freely held elections. The people and parties who have lost power, or those who failed to gain it, must be willing to accept defeat. If the loser refuses to accept the winner, the election's legitimacy is diminished and the political system may be marked by conflict and instability. A key test for a democracy is the successful and peaceful transfer of power from one party to another. Indeed, this is a continuous test for any democracy.

Strongmen and warlords have not only participated in electoral politics for power, but are understood to have also not challenged the peaceful transfer of political power. Most of these figures have participated and contested multiple elections in the post-conflict period, even after their first attempts or second attempts had not been successful. For instance, Afghanistan’s
current vice president, Abdul Rashid Dostum, who has participated in one way or another, in multiple elections, was only elected to office in the 2014 presidential elections. These interactions through political competition are in fact facilitators of a peaceful process which was significantly different from the armed struggles of the past and has come to very much define Afghanistan’s political future through positive engagements.

The conditions necessary for developing democracy tend not to exist in post-conflict states, but democracy as a political system has nevertheless been pressed for states after war. Institutional breakdowns, fragmented societies, armed groups, corruption, patronage, and ethnic and sectarian strife are all hallmarks of conflict and post-conflict states. Even when democracy is introduced, many of these problems remain to exist which impedes efforts at peace and political progress. Afghanistan is still reeling from many of these difficulties which have challenged its political system and have kept the country from fully advancing. Post-conflict states are particularly vulnerable to relapses in violence and therefore must proceed with extra caution in its state-building and democratization efforts. As a result of incremental progresses however, the state can move slowly on its many promises and in its ability to provide immediate security, thus hampering the state’s ability to deliver swift results. Scholars have noted the important role local leaders have when it comes to political stability and ensuring that there is no return back to conflict (Peak et al. 2004, 16). Therefore strongmen were essential partners in the post-2001 period because they were well position to provide immediate security in many areas of the country.

The warlord-democracy nexus develops from the idea that in the aftermath conflicts, those who maintain their coercive abilities must enter peaceful politics if genuine democracy is to be realized. Therefore, as Khalilzad (2010, 42) states, “It is critical to create space for leaders
and groups who seek power based on popular support, and to engineer a transition that diminishes the influence of armed groups.” Wantchekon (2004, 18) recognizes democracy in post-civil war states as being “essentially a tool for elite cooperation in the process of creating a political order.” The connections between warlords to democracy are perceived to be counterintuitive since warlord rulers are widely understood to be unfavourable to democracy and the state in general. However, this study has attempted to present a different and hopefully more nuanced interpretation of post-conflict strongmen and regional leaders and their abilities to engage with the state and democracy. An essential requirement for democracy and political stability is the notion of legitimacy. Strongmen such as Mohaqiq, Khan and others did retain a high-level of legitimacy from their bases of support which was a factor which allowed political contention in the post-conflict period to exist as it did. As Lipset (1959, 97) argues, “A stable democracy requires relatively moderate tension among the contending political forces.” This for him is a necessary requirement in the democratization process. The political contention between strongmen has in fact created political contestation which has facilitated the political process through positive forms of contention.

Of course, strongmen and warlords have not been the only forces responsible for Afghanistan’s political progresses and stability. The international community, with a large military presence and billions of dollars in aid, has been central to Afghanistan’s political and democratic developments. This study does not negate the immense contributions of the international community in their efforts to support Afghanistan and the Afghan people. But in many of the discussions and debates surrounding Afghanistan, the perspective of the strongmen’s engagement with the state and democracy tends to get overlooked or not given serious consideration. As the country moves towards a more inclusive politics, it is important to
note the efforts of some strongmen in this transition process and the significant political compromises they have made to facilitate the democratic process. With respect to political compromises which has allowed for a more peaceful politics, the reconciliation between former adversaries and armed competitors are clear examples. Tilly (2004, 197-198) noted that shocks of civil war accelerate the transformation of “inequality, trust networks, and public politics,” which for him were necessary issues where positive changes demonstrated a country was on its path towards democracy. This issue of trust networks is particularly interesting, since ‘warlord politics,’ and war in general, are heavily influenced and involved with networks of support and trust. In the post-war period, and in particular with the 2014 presidential elections, the inclination of strongmen to build coalitions and alliances exemplified their political willingness to compromise and increasing ‘trust’ within society and with former competitors and their groups. This political compromises and coalitions built important networks which translated into public politics and increased the participation on the part of the people which helped reinforce the democratic process.

Furthermore, coalition building and choice of vice presidential running mates also displayed increased level of ‘trust networks’ which proved essential to these elections and allowed for a diplomatic approach to past rivalries. Therefore coalitions allowed former armed competitors to unite around a single candidacy while moving away from past hostilities and armed opposition. The case of General Dostum and Juma Khan Hamdard is a clear example of this. In May, during the elections period, both Dostum and Hamdard decided to “bury the hatchet” to a long standing feud which arose after Hamdard was appointed governor of Jowzjan province — a stronghold of Dostum (Ahmadzai 2014). Violence had broken out previously between the two which eventually forced Hamdard out as governor of Jowzjan. This alliance-
building between the two men took place among elders and influential actors from both sides which was intended to build public trust and increase the teams influence by uniting both men and their supporters around a single platform. Khalilzad (2010, 42) has noted on the importance of post-conflict states initiating “political agreements among important groups” as a process of stabilizing state politics and helping with the democratization process. Further political comprise and building-up of ‘trust’ was demonstrated when various past competing military-political parties formed networks and alliances with past armed rivals and competitors. For example, there were many cases of factions uniting in their quests for political unity which brought together many groups and people. This was witness, for example, when Jamiat-i Islami united with Hizb-i Wahdat, and Junbish-i Milli united with Hizb-i Islami, or when Hiz-i Islami united with Jamiat-i Islami. As a result, such displays of political compromise, and the demonstration of ‘trust’ between past rivals, will prove valuable for Afghanistan’s long-term efforts at peace and democracy.

Current Afghan vice president Rashid Dostum, and strongmen Mohaqiq, have also encouraged and organized youth wings within their political parties which has empowered many Afghan’s and has acted as outlets for them to involve themselves in political and social life. In just about every province where the political party Junbish is active, there are opportunities for young members to join the Junbish Jawwona, or ‘Young Junbish’ organization. These youth wings have political offices and representatives throughout the country, as well as representatives at the international level who maintain an international network of support for programs and issues that involve Afghanistan. Such support and networks have proven extremely valuable where they carried out important functions during the campaigning process in 2014.
The de-militarized nature of warlord involvement and engagement was significant for post-conflict Afghanistan which reflected the ‘rebel-to-party transformation.’ Armed politics, most associated to warlordism and strongmen, was not a factor in these elections, but instead, political competition based on popular support and gaining voters is what strongmen most focused their attention. This focus on electoral politics was demonstrated by the many efforts of strongmen to participate in democracy, including the months spent canvassing the country and contacting with supporters and potential voters. This was a critical component when it came to encouraging constituents to vote.

Recommendations for post-conflict state-building and democratization can vary markedly from state to state. As it has been established, state breakdown and civil wars tend to give rise to a strongman-style rule which is a phenomenon that influences, in a significant way, the post-conflict state-building and democratization process. Civil wars also result in the fragmentation of societies which produce cleavages that can be regional or ethnic in their composition and which can act as possible fault lines in future hostilities. This study discussed ‘warlordism’ in reference to post-conflict armed groups while distinguishing that such labels have not necessarily describe Afghanistan’s political dynamics. This is in part a reflection of a ‘rebel-to-party transformation’ on the part of warlords in Afghanistan where ‘warlordism’ is no longer effective for describing Afghanistan’s current political realities. Therefore, the incongruity of the ‘warlord’ label, with current attempts at democratization, exemplifies a positive shift away from warlordism to individuals with political party affiliations contesting via democratic means.


Stern, Jeffrey. (2014, March 27). This Former John Hopkins Professor Could Be Afghanistan’s Next President. New Republic.


