

Local and National Governance in Afghanistan

Wednesday, June 24th, 2009

On Wednesday, June 24th, the South Asia Program welcomed Dr. George Varughese, of the Asia Foundation for a discussion on local and national governance in Afghanistan. As the former Asia Foundation representative in Afghanistan, Dr. Varughese oversaw projects including institution building, governance research, and women's advancement. He was hosted by Ambassador Teresita Schaffer, the Director of the South Asia Program at CSIS, and Karin von Hippel, Codirector of the Post-Conflict Reconstruction Project at CSIS.

A Critical Flaw

This meeting addressed some of the specific difficulties that exist in Afghan nation building. Dr. Varughese arrived in Afghanistan in 2004, just in time for the Presidential election which brought Hamid Karzai to power officially. The structure of government was just coming into place. Afghanistan became a Presidential system with a bicameral legislature. The legislative branch consists of a House of the People, which is made up of directly elected representatives, and the House of Elders, which is only two-thirds elected, and one-third appointed. The House of Elders, which represents districts and provinces, has much less legislative power than the House of the People.

This is a major problem in Afghani politics: there is a vacuum in local representation. Dr. Varughese pointed out that the critical systemic flaw in Afghanistan's governance is the lack of elected district representation. District councils, governors and mayors are all appointed. Additionally, with federal elections to occur every year in the foreseeable future, stability may be elusive as Afghanis become increasingly jaded. For example, this year, Afghanistan is preparing for its Presidential election, slated to be its most expensive election yet. Despite its price, its tangibility will be dubious for most Afghanis.

Do's and Don'ts

Dr. Varughese had specific recommendations to strengthen Afghani governance. The first step should be tackling corruption, and public perception. The last two years have seen a spike in the public's observance of corruption at both the local and national levels. In order to contain and fight this problem, Dr. Varughese recommended that the government make symbolic and visible moves to demonstrate a perceptible shift in the tolerance of corruption. One way to do this would be to make merit-based appointments in the Cabinet instead of fostering nepotism. The second step is to focus on four or five key economic sectors in order to begin to rebuild Afghanistan. Dr. Varughese feels that policy making in Afghanistan is often too idealistic. In reality, only a few sectors of the economy show progress and promise. The areas to focus on are health, education,

reconstruction, and energy. These are areas which show potential and room for growth for Afghanistan, and should be stressed.

Dr. Varughese also specified certain ministries that warranted increased investment. The Finance Ministry should be bolstered in order to attract increased investment and donations for reconstruction. The Foreign Affairs Ministry, he argued, has been underemphasized. Afghanistan must begin to have relations with its neighbors, such as India. The Ministry of Women's Affairs, a department created only in 2001, needs to be made viable. It lacks funds and strong enough links with Parliament.

Finally, another visible and essential institution which requires reform is the police force. Dr. Varughese argued that there has been a general underinvestment in the police, namely in equipment and training. Police morale is low, which may correlate to their low salaries. Expectedly, these low salaries also breed corruption. Though the police force is an indispensable institution, the public has a very poor perception of it.

An Argument for Decentralization

Since the fall of the Taliban and the installation of the current regime, the central government has been the focus of attention, and for good reason. The eradication of the Taliban and reconstruction of the country have required a strong, central state to take decisive action. However, as described above, this has left a vacuum in local governance. In order to create even representation, Dr. Varughese argued that the government should focus more on subnational governance. Provinces and districts should be able to raise and disperse their own funds. This will help to reconcile the various culture and ethnic groups within Afghanistan. The government should also focus on strengthening civil society, claimed Dr. Varughese. One of the consequences of decades of war is a broken society in which citizens do not trust each other or the government.

Karin von Hippel, of the Post-Conflict Reconstruction Project at CSIS, raised a point about localized justice. She claimed that the insufficient court system, and the gargantuan bureaucracy associated with it, have created a vacuum. She argued that this is a space that the Taliban rushes to fill. As Dr. Varughese pointed out, though, there are unofficial forms of decision making and dispute resolution. Shura Councils are extremely helpful in resolving disputes, and help protect against attacks on community assets. Much of the strength in Afghanistan is derived from these local institutions that have not received enough attention.

Conclusion: A Balancing Act

Overall, Dr. Varughese emphasized the need to strengthen the central government, but lamented the underinvestment in local institutions. Local representation should be elected rather than appointed, and control should be somewhat decentralized. The Afghan government, and others involved in reconstruction, should focus on key sectors that show promise in Afghanistan's government. Corruption should be strongly and visibly countered so that Afghani's can begin to trust their leaders. It is clear that in order to face Afghanistan's challenges, there needs to be a greater emphasis on local institutions, while still providing the federal government with adequate strength.