

MOVING BEYOND THE ABSENCE OF WAR: DISCUSSING THE PROSPECT FOR POSITIVE PEACE IN TALIBAN-ADMINISTERED AFGHANISTAN

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Introduction

Afghanistan has endured one of the longest-running conflicts in the world, trapped in a vicious cycle of political instability, regime changes, foreign interventions, civil wars, and immense human suffering for over five decades. Despite substantial international efforts through initiatives like the Geneva Accord (1988), the Bonn Agreement (2001), and the Doha Agreement between the United States and the Taliban (2020), sustainable peace has remained elusive. Since the 1973 coup, the country has witnessed persistent turmoil, often exacerbated by attempts to resolve the conflict, perpetuating the cycle of violence. The Bonn process in 2001 aimed to address three decades of upheaval by establishing a constitutional government with international support. However, the 2020 "Peace" Agreement between the US and the Taliban, facilitated by Pakistan and held in Qatar, supplanted the Bonn Process with the "Doha Process," which has unfortunately exacerbated Afghanistan's enduring challenges. The tragedy lies in the nature and extent of the country's afflictions and in the multitude of prescriptions offered by various self-appointed local and international actors, which have only deepened the suffering (Afghanistan Institute for Strategic Studies, 2022). Given the failures of previous peacebuilding efforts, this raises a critical question: How can Afghanistan break free from this entrenched cycle of structural violence and recurring internal conflict?

The Taliban's military triumph in August 2021, which culminated in the overthrow of the U.S.-backed Afghan government, ushered in a new era of uncertainty and turmoil for Afghanistan's war-torn society (United States Institute of Peace, 2021). The Taliban's exploitation and re-centralization of power, characterized by the exclusion of non-Pashtun ethnic groups and the enforcement of a strict, Pashtun-dominated interpretation of Sharia law, is poised to reignite civil war and instability in Afghanistan. This exclusionary governance not only marginalizes significant portions of the Afghan population but also deepens ethnic divisions, fostering resentment and resistance among non-Pashtun groups. Such internal conflict can create a breeding ground for extremist factions and insurgencies, similar to the pre-9/11 environment. The instability in Afghanistan has the potential to spill over into other

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parts of the world, as the country could once again become a haven for terrorist groups aiming to exploit the chaos for global jihad. This scenario raises the specter of international terrorist activities akin to the 9/11 attacks, threatening global security and potentially prompting international military interventions, thereby destabilizing the region further and impacting global peace and stability (Singh, 2022).

In the aftermath of protracted conflicts, establishing an inclusive political framework capable of bridging divides in fragmented societies like Afghanistan is paramount (Sempiga, 2017). Merely halting direct violence is insufficient to guarantee sustainable peace and stability. Consequently, crafting a political structure that can reshape politics and power dynamics becomes vital, guiding them toward a constructive trajectory. The recent withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan has sparked widespread calls for an inclusive system, echoing both internationally and among Afghans themselves. This underscores its pivotal role in gaining internal legitimacy, securing global recognition, and nurturing genuine peace in a nation scarred by war (Rubin, 2022). By revisiting the approach to peacebuilding in Afghanistan through the lens of Johan Galtung's peace theory, this paper argues that political decentralization can address the structural drivers of conflict in Afghanistan by facilitating an inclusive political system that represents the country's diverse ethnic groups, thereby fostering positive peace. This study contributes to the discourse on conflict resolution in ethnically diverse societies. It aims to shift the narrative from merely pursuing a negative peace (absence of war) to fostering a positive peace encompassing fair and inclusive social and political structures, as theorized by Galtung. Addressing the root causes of conflict through decentralized inclusive structures that respect Afghanistan's heterogeneous nature is crucial for breaking the cycle of violence and achieving long-term stability.

To this end, this paper employs a qualitative approach, incorporating a critical review of relevant literature, case studies, and historical analysis. It is divided into three main sections: 1) An examination of the limitations of previous external and Afghan-led peacebuilding efforts; 2) An exploration of political decentralization and its efficacy in managing diversity in multi-ethnic societies; and 3) An in-depth discussion of the specific prospects and dynamics of implementing political decentralization in post-US Afghanistan as a groundwork for positive peace.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review critically examines the existing scholarship on governance models in Afghanistan, specifically focusing on the potential of decentralization for achieving positive peace in the post-US era. Barfield (2012) and Sadr (2016) demonstrate the historical efficacy of decentralized governance in Afghanistan, particularly during the Musahiban dynasty

from 1929 to 1978, which acknowledged regional autonomy and diverse ethnic needs. However, neglecting Afghanistan's post-war complexities, the post-2004 centralized approach has arguably exacerbated ethnic tensions (Sadr, 2016). This scholarship critiques the rigid centralization vs. federalism binary, overlooking possibilities like political decentralization mechanisms. Furthermore, Shahrani contends that the centralization efforts desired and implemented in Afghanistan since the latter part of the nineteenth century have been ill-suited for the heterogeneous, multi-ethnic, and predominantly tribal Afghan society. This centralized approach has been repeatedly attempted and implemented for over 13 decades, yet the outcomes have been disastrous (Shahran, 2017).

The literature reflects on the failures of centralized governance in addressing the root causes of ethnic division and promoting stability. This aligns with Johan Galtung's (1996) concept of positive peace, which emphasizes addressing root causes for sustainable peace. This paper argues that exploring decentralization through a positive peace lens goes beyond mere governance improvements. Instead, it offers a framework for fostering long-term peace in Afghanistan by tackling the structural issues that fuel conflict. While existing research recognizes the limitations of centralization, a comprehensive analysis of political decentralization's peacebuilding potential remains limited. This paper aims to fill this gap by examining the political decentralization model through the lens of positive peace. By analyzing its capacity to address ethnic conflict and foster inclusivity, the study seeks to contribute substantive insights for positive peace and inclusive governance strategies in post-US Afghanistan.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Johan Galtung's seminal work lays a critical foundation for understanding peace beyond the simplistic absence of active conflict or negative peace. Galtung introduces a comprehensive vision of positive peace as the absence of all forms of violence -- direct, structural, and cultural. According to Galtung, conflicts are dynamic, involving a complex interplay of attitudes and behaviors and underlying contradictions of goals and incompatibilities of interests. Galtung's conflict triangle model depicts these three interrelated elements. Negative peace is the absence of direct violence, while positive peace involves overcoming structural and cultural violence by addressing injustices and changing attitudes. Peacemaking aims to change attitudes, peacekeeping reduces destructive behaviors, and peacebuilding tackles the root contradictions of the conflict (Galtung, 1996).

Direct, structural, and cultural violence are the three critical dimensions of Galtung's framework. Direct violence encompasses physical and psychological harm, structural violence refers to systemic inequalities within societal institutions, and cultural violence

arises from a society's cultural, religious, or ideological beliefs that justify or normalize other forms of violence. In the context of Afghanistan, these interrelated forms of violence have manifested in the centralized governance system, discriminatory practices favoring certain ethnic groups, and persistent cultural narratives that reinforce inequalities. Adopting Galtung's inter-connected models (Fig 1) as an analytical tool, this study focuses on the necessity of integrated peacebuilding approaches involving peacemaking, peacekeeping, and peace building efforts designed to address the underpinning contradictions fueling conflict. A re-envisioned peacebuilding approach in Afghanistan must prioritize the dismantling of structural and cultural violence through inclusive governance models (Galtung, 1996).

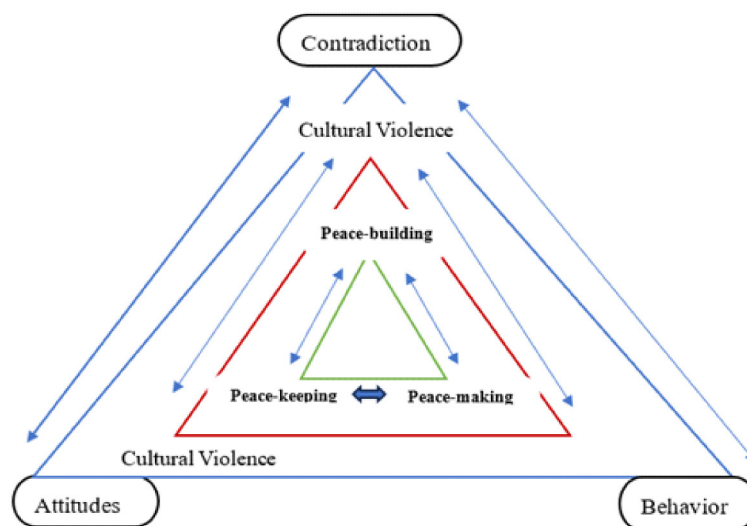


Figure 1: Galtung's Triangles of Conflict, Violence, And Peace

Applying Johan Galtung's theory of peace provides a nuanced lens to analyze the post-2021 Afghanistan conflict and propose viable solutions. Political decentralization is a critical strategy for addressing fundamental power imbalances among ethnic groups and moving towards a positive peace where direct, structural, and cultural violence is eradicated, paving the way for a stable, just, and equitable Afghanistan.

ANALYSIS OF PEACE BUILDING EFFORTS IN AFGHANISTAN

Over the past five decades, Afghanistan has witnessed a series of external and internal initiatives to establish peace and a viable state structure. These efforts, spanning from the late 20th century to the early 21st century, have been characterized by their diverse approaches and varying degrees of international involvement. However, despite the resources and diplomatic efforts invested, these initiatives have consistently fallen short of achieving durable peace. This section critically examines five significant peacebuilding efforts, both

externally driven and domestically led, that have ultimately failed in their pursuit of lasting stability in Afghanistan. Through a meticulous analysis of the underlying factors that contributed to the failures of these attempts, valuable insights emerge, informing the discourse on effective peacebuilding strategies tailored to Afghanistan's complex dynamics. Examining these peacebuilding efforts is grounded in Johan Galtung's peace theory, which distinguishes between negative peace (the absence of direct violence) and positive peace (the absence of structural and cultural violence). This theoretical framework provides a critical lens through which to evaluate the successes and shortcomings of each initiative, particularly in addressing the deep-rooted structural inequalities and cultural tensions that have fueled conflict in Afghanistan. By applying this perspective, we can better understand why efforts focused solely on achieving negative peace have consistently failed to bring about lasting stability in the country.

EXTERNAL ATTEMPTS FOR PEACE-BUILDING IN AFGHANISTAN

THE GENEVA ACCORDS (1988)

The Geneva Accords of 1988 marked a significant milestone in Afghanistan's recent history, primarily focusing on facilitating the withdrawal of Soviet forces from the country. However, this narrow focus on ending Soviet involvement proved a critical shortcoming, as it neglected the complex internal power dynamics and conflicts among various Afghan factions. The exclusion of key stakeholders, notably the Mujahideen and the Najibullah regime, from the negotiation process further undermined the agreement's effectiveness and legitimacy within Afghanistan (Rubin, 2003). This oversight reflected a fundamental misunderstanding of the multifaceted nature of the Afghan conflict, which extended far beyond the simple binary of Soviet occupation versus Afghan resistance.

The consequences of this shortsighted approach were far-reaching and long-lasting. By failing to address the underlying power struggles and ethnic tensions within Afghanistan, the Geneva Accords set the stage for continued instability in the post-Soviet era. The power vacuum left by the Soviet withdrawal was quickly filled by competing factions, leading to a protracted civil war that devastated the country's infrastructure and social fabric. Moreover, the absence of a comprehensive peace settlement that included all relevant parties contributed to the rise of extremist groups, ultimately culminating in the events of September 11, 2001. Through the lens of Galtung's peace theory, the Geneva Accords can be seen as an attempt to achieve negative peace by removing the immediate threat of foreign occupation. However, they failed to address the structural and cultural violence deeply embedded in Afghan society, such as ethnic marginalization and the centralization of power, which continued to fuel conflict long after the Soviet withdrawal.

THE BONN AGREEMENT (2001)

The Bonn Agreement 2001, orchestrated in the wake of the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan, represented a significant international effort to establish a new political order. The agreement focused on creating a power-sharing arrangement among elite groups representing four major ethnic factions: Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks. While this approach aimed to be inclusive, it paradoxically led to the exclusion of broader segments of Afghan society from the national decision-making process. The agreement's emphasis on centralizing power in Kabul, modelled on Western governance structures, failed to account for Afghanistan's historically decentralized political landscape and diverse ethnic composition. This mismatch between imposed governance structures and local realities laid the foundation for future instability and conflict (Nojumi, 2016).

From the perspective of Galtung's peace theory, the Bonn Agreement can be seen as an attempt to establish negative peace by creating formal government structures and ceasing immediate hostilities. However, it fell short in addressing the underlying structural violence inherent in Afghan society. The marginalization of certain ethnic groups, particularly segments of the Pashtun population that felt underrepresented in the new government, perpetuated feelings of exclusion and resentment. Furthermore, power's centralization exacerbated tensions between the central government and local power structures, undermining the state's legitimacy in many rural areas. The exclusion of the Taliban from the peace process, despite their significant influence in parts of the country, proved to be a critical oversight. This exclusion not only delegitimized the agreement in the eyes of a substantial portion of the population but also provided the Taliban with a rallying point for the insurgency. The subsequent years of conflict and the eventual resurgence of the Taliban in 2021 can be traced back to these fundamental flaws in the Bonn Agreement's approach to peacebuilding in Afghanistan.

THE DOHA AGREEMENT (2020)

The Doha Agreement, signed in February 2020 between the United States and the Taliban, marked a significant shift in the international approach to the Afghan conflict. Unlike previous agreements, which focused on building a centralized Afghan state, the Doha Agreement primarily aimed at facilitating the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces from Afghanistan. This narrow focus on achieving an acceptable exit strategy for the United States represented a departure from earlier, more comprehensive peacebuilding efforts. While the agreement succeeded in its primary objective of enabling U.S. military withdrawal, it failed to address the complex internal dynamics of the Afghan conflict or provide a framework for a comprehensive peace settlement among Afghan parties (Poya, 2022).

The shortcomings of the Doha Agreement become apparent when analyzed through Galtung's peace theory. The agreement focused almost exclusively on achieving negative peace by ending direct violence between U.S. forces and the Taliban. However, it neglected to address the structural and cultural violence deeply embedded in Afghan society, such as ethnic marginalization, economic inequalities, and ideological differences. The agreement failed to create conditions conducive to lasting peace by sidestepping these crucial issues. Moreover, the exclusion of the Afghan government from the negotiation process undermined its legitimacy and weakened its position vis-à-vis the Taliban. This power imbalance, coupled with the rapid withdrawal of international forces, created a vacuum that the Taliban quickly exploited, leading to their swift takeover of the country in August 2021. The agreement's failure to integrate the military forces of the central government and the Taliban or to address the level of internal violence left Afghanistan vulnerable to renewed conflict. Consequently, the Doha Agreement, while achieving its short-term goal of U.S. withdrawal, ultimately contributed to the perpetuation of conflict and instability in Afghanistan by failing to address the root causes of the country's long-standing issues.

INTERNAL ATTEMPTS FOR PEACE-BUILDING

THE NATIONAL RECONCILIATION POLICY (NRP)

The National Reconciliation Policy (NRP), initiated by President Najibullah in the mid-1980s as the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan approached, represented a significant internal attempt at peacebuilding. This initiative aimed to negotiate an end to the conflict with the mujahideen and establish terms for a comprehensive political settlement. The NRP's approach was notable for blending traditional Afghan socio-political practices for consultation and decision-making with a pragmatic political strategy to build domestic support and international legitimacy. This dual approach reflected an understanding of the need to address local cultural contexts and broader geopolitical realities to pursue peace (Najibullah, 2017).

However, the NRP faced significant challenges that ultimately led to its failure. The collapse of geopolitical strategic interests in Afghanistan at the end of the Cold War resulted in a dwindling of vital international support for the program, fatally undermining its efforts. This shift in international priorities highlights the vulnerability of internal peacebuilding initiatives to external geopolitical dynamics. Furthermore, the mujahideen, viewing themselves as victors against the Soviet Union, were unwilling to negotiate with a regime they perceived as pro-Soviet and doomed to collapse. This intransigence underscores the difficulty of achieving reconciliation when opposing factions hold fundamentally different perceptions of their positions and legitimacy. The subsequent power vacuum created by the collapse of

the Soviet Union allowed neighboring countries to pursue their respective interests within Afghanistan, further complicating the peace process. Pakistan's support for Pashtun Islamist groups and the backing of non-Pashtun factions by Iran, India, and Russia led to a proxy conflict that exacerbated internal divisions and undermined efforts at national reconciliation.

EFFORTS BY THE MUJAHIDEEN GOVERNMENT (1992-1996)

The period following the Soviet withdrawal in February 1989 and the collapse of Najibullah's regime in April 1992 marked a new era of sustained violence in Afghanistan, characterized by a deadly and disruptive power struggle among rival Mujahideen factions. This conflict phase was further complicated by direct intervention from neighboring countries, each pursuing their own strategic interests in the region. The "Peshawar Accord" of late April 1992 represented a significant attempt by the Mujahideen groups to establish a transitional government. The accord, which saw six of the seven major Mujahideen groups agree to form a Transitional Council, aimed to create a power-sharing arrangement that could bring stability to the country. However, the Peshawar Accord and subsequent efforts by the Mujahideen government faced numerous challenges that ultimately led to their failure. The refusal of key figures like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar to accept the proposed power-sharing arrangement highlighted the deep divisions and personal ambitions that undermined collective efforts at peace building. Hekmatyar's rejection of the prime minister position and subsequent declaration as president and winner of the war against the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul exemplified the intense competition for power that characterized this period. These internal power struggles, combined with the ongoing interference of external actors, perpetuated a cycle of violence and instability that the Mujahideen government was unable to break. The failure of these efforts to address the fundamental ethnic conflicts over power and the structural violence inherent in Afghanistan's highly centralized system rendered them ineffective in fostering lasting peace and stability in the ethnically fractured country.

The persistent conflicts and failed peace building efforts in Afghanistan can be traced to the excessive centralization of power, which has aggravated ethnic conflict by positioning the state as a party to the conflict and incentivizing competition for central control. This dynamic has exacerbated divisions and fostered Galtung's concept of structural violence through systemic marginalization, as exemplified by recent protests against the imposition of outsider officials disregarding local needs in various regions. The failure to address these underlying issues of power distribution and ethnic representation has consistently undermined efforts at achieving sustainable peace in Afghanistan, highlighting the need for more inclusive and decentralized approaches to governance and conflict resolution.

METHODS FOR CONFLICT MITIGATION IN DIVIDED SOCIETIES

Afghanistan's deeply divided society presents significant challenges in achieving lasting peace, with decades of conflict exposing the limitations of centralized governance. McGarry and O'Leary's taxonomy of methods for regulating ethnic conflicts in divided societies provides a framework for addressing these challenges (Fig 2). They classify these methods into two broad categories: eliminating differences and managing differences. The elimination approach, historically attempted by the Taliban through persecution and displacement of non-Pashtun ethnic groups, has proven ineffective and often exacerbates conflict. Conversely, management approaches, which include various forms of power-sharing and representation, offer more promising avenues for conflict mitigation (McGarry & O'Leary, 1993).

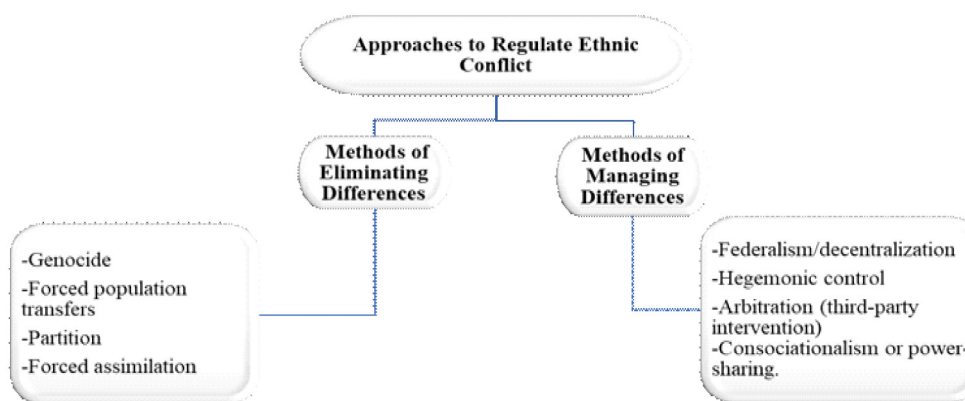


Figure 2. Methods for eliminating and managing ethnic conflict

Source: Adapted from McGarry, J., & O'Leary, B. (Eds.). (1993). *The Politics of Ethnic Conflict Regulation*.

Against this backdrop, this paper advocates for a political decentralization model to address ethnic conflict in Afghanistan's divided society and promote positive peace. It contends that traditional methods of managing diversity and creating inclusive institutions via centralization of power have proven ineffective. Political decentralization is proposed as a viable solution, as it aligns with Afghanistan realities, where the Pashtun political elites denounced federalism as a taboo in Afghanistan. They argued that any decentralization effort would disintegrate the country. Political decentralization encompasses two key aspects: decision-making decentralization, wherein one or more sub-national levels of government have the sole authority over at least one policy domain, and appointment decentralization, where local residents select government officials at one or more sub-national tiers, independent of higher levels of government. Political decentralization offers several potential advantages for conflict mitigation and promoting positive peace in

Afghanistan. Firstly, it can contribute to a reduction in inter-ethnic conflict by empowering local communities to manage their affairs and address grievances at the local level, potentially alleviating feelings of marginalization among various ethnic groups. Secondly, decentralization can enhance governmental legitimacy and citizen participation by enabling direct election of local representatives, thereby fostering a sense of ownership and accountability among the populace. Thirdly, it allows for more flexible governance structures that can accommodate the diverse needs and interests of different ethnic groups, potentially preventing the imposition of homogeneous policies from the center that may alienate certain population segments. While political decentralization is not a comprehensive solution to Afghanistan's complex challenges, it presents a promising approach to fostering positive peace by addressing underlying causes of conflict and promoting social inclusion. By devolving power and encouraging greater local autonomy, decentralization can create a more responsive and legitimate government better equipped to manage ethnic tensions and build positive peace.

PROSPECTS FOR POSITIVE PEACE THROUGH POLITICAL DECENTRALIZATION

Decentralization involves three key dimensions: fiscal (allocation of financial resources and budgetary control), administrative (operational independence in service delivery and resource allocation), and political (control over governance functions like representation, policy formulation, and legislative processes). It reduces central government involvement across these aspects, empowering local governance and potentially fostering more responsive and representative structures. Decentralized systems are a strategic choice for states, driven by two significant factors. States gravitate towards decentralized/federal arrangements when confronted with extensive geographical territories or profound societal diversity. In such contexts, relying solely on a centralized authority to dictate policies risks generating regional friction and alienation. A single, overarching source of policy may struggle to accommodate the unique needs and preferences stemming from varying geographical landscapes or diverse cultural backgrounds. Thus, decentralization/federalism emerges as a pragmatic solution, empowering regional governments to tailor policies that resonate more closely with their respective populations, fostering a more harmonious and effective governance structure (Treisman, 2007).

Johan Galtung's theory of positive peace provides a valuable framework for analyzing the prospect of positive peace through a decentralized political system in Afghanistan. The proposed decentralized model aims to achieve peace by empowering local communities and fostering inclusive governance structures that acknowledge and accommodate Afghanistan's profound ethnic diversity. At the local/provincial level, the prospect for a

decentralized system envisions the division of Afghanistan into four autonomous regions, each centered around the predominant ethnic group within its geographical boundaries: (1) Pashtuns in the southern and eastern regions, (2) Tajiks in the northeastern and western regions, (3) Hazaras in the central regions, and (4) Uzbeks in the northwestern regions. These regions would function as semi-independent administrative entities with the authority to appoint local leadership and exercise decision-making autonomy over matters in their respective domains. This approach directly addresses the structural violence inherent in Afghanistan's previous centralized governing structures, which marginalized and excluded non-Pashtun ethnic groups from decision-making processes that shape their lives by granting greater autonomy to regions dominated by distinct ethnic groups, thus fostering a sense of enfranchisement and representation, consequently addressing the root causes of conflict and paving the way for positive peace.

At the national level, the proposed system envisions a parliamentary framework that provides a platform for power-sharing among Afghanistan's diverse ethnic groups, with the position of president, traditionally held by a Pashtun, serving as the ceremonial head of state. In contrast, the role of the prime minister - the head of government - could rotate periodically among representatives of different non-Pashtun ethnic groups, thereby preventing the personalization of power and ensuring a more inclusive decision-making process. This distribution of authority aligns with Galtung's emphasis on inclusive governance structures that facilitate dialogue, compromise, and non-violent resolution of conflicts (Galtung, 1996), as the parliamentary system establishes clear lines of responsibility and accountability, empowering voters to hold parties accountable for their promises and actions, consequently fostering trust in governing institutions and promoting transparency.

Furthermore, in parliamentary systems, the executive branch comprises the prime minister and cabinet, who oversee political and administrative leadership, along with a head of state responsible for the symbolic leadership of the state. Conversely, in a presidential system, these roles are consolidated in a single individual-the president. The main difference between the two systems lies in the distribution of executive power. In a parliamentary system, the power is shared between the head of state and the head of government. The head of state is a symbolic figure, while the head of government (usually the prime minister) is the real leader of the executive branch. In a presidential system, on the other hand, all executive power is concentrated in the hands of the president, who serves as both head of state and head of government. Furthermore, the proposed system addresses the pitfalls of majoritarian systems in divided societies, as highlighted by scholars like Larry Diamond. By decentralizing power and fostering inclusive governance, Afghanistan can overcome the

perils of indefinite exclusion of significant groups, which has been a driving force behind conflicts and instability in the past. Galtung's theory recognizes that achieving positive peace requires more than the cessation of direct violence; it necessitates the transformation of cultural and structural factors that perpetuate conflict (Galtung, 1996). Afghanistan's proposed decentralized political system aligns with this vision by addressing the root causes of marginalization, exclusion, and grievances through inclusive institutions that recognize and accommodate diverse perspectives (Shively, 2019).

Table 1.1: Key differences between parliamentary and presidential systems:

Feature	Parliamentary System	Presidential System
Head of State	Separate, symbolic figure	President
Head of Government	Prime Minister, Premier, Chancellor	President
Executive Power	Cabinet led by Prime Minister	President
Bureaucracy	Overseen by Cabinet	Overseen by President
Military	Overseen by Cabinet	Overseen by President
Diplomacy	Overseen by Cabinet	Overseen by President
Policy Development	Developed by Cabinet	Developed by President

Source: Shively, W. P. (2019). Power & choice: An introduction to political science (15th ed.). Rowman & Littlefield.

FOSTERING PROSPECTS FOR POSITIVE PEACE

The concept of peace extends beyond the mere absence of armed conflict; it encompasses eliminating direct personal violence and indirect structural violence. However, the definition requires elaboration, as the violence threshold constituting peace failure may vary across societies. Carey, González, and Glaber argue that citizens associated with the victorious faction in a conflict should retrospectively view the peace process more positively than those on the losing side (Horowitz, 1985; Bermeo, 2002; Ghai, 2000; Schneider, 2003). Furthermore, winning group members should also be more optimistic about future prospects for peace, given their dominant position in the political and societal landscape after victory. Hence, peace is shaped by the conflict-affected society's beliefs, opinions, and preferences. Afghanistan's persistent low placement on the Positive Peace Index (PPI) underscores its enduring struggle for lasting, fair peace. Despite a slight PPI score uptick by 2020, Afghanistan ranked 153rd among 163 assessed countries. Its standing

deteriorated further, plummeting to 156th in 2023, exacerbated by the Taliban's exclusionary policies and regressive governance marginalizing substantial population segments (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2023).

The 2021 Global Peace Index revealed that Afghanistan experienced the highest internal conflict deaths and bore one of the most significant economic burdens of violence worldwide at 40.3% of GDP. This highlights the urgent need for a paradigm shift addressing structural conflict drivers and fostering an inclusive political order. The Institute for Economics and Peace identifies eight positive peace pillars that create and reinforce peaceful societies. A decentralized political framework can strengthen Afghanistan's eight pillars of positive peace. Empowering local/provincial governments with autonomy fosters accountability, responsiveness, and tailored economic policies for a sound business environment. Devolving resource control enables equitable distribution of public goods across diverse regions. Accommodating ethnic group aspirations promotes acceptance of minority rights. While addressing internal dynamics, an inclusive structure can improve regional relations. Allowing local media freedom facilitates open information flow. Local prioritization supports human capital investment in education and skills. Bringing governance closer to the populace reduces corruption opportunities through transparency and accountability (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2023).

CHALLENGES ON THE PATH TO POSITIVE PEACE

The fragmentation of anti-Taliban forces can be attributed to three primary factors: ideological divergence, leadership vacuum, and strategic disagreements. Ideologically, the opposition spans a wide spectrum from secular modernists to conservative Islamists, making consensus on governance models difficult. The absence of a charismatic, unifying leader compounds this issue, as no figure has emerged with the credibility and appeal to bridge these ideological divides. Strategically, disagreements persist over whether to engage in armed resistance, pursue political negotiations, or focus on international advocacy. Historical rivalries, ethnic tensions, and competing regional influences further exacerbate these divisions. The international community's ambivalent stance towards engaging with the Taliban regime also complicates the opposition's efforts to formulate a coherent alternative vision for Afghanistan's future. Overcoming these challenges requires internal reconciliation among opposition factions and reimagining Afghanistan's political landscape that transcends traditional power structures and ethnic divisions.

Despite the significant obstacles, the potential for a more unified opposition movement exists, predicated on several factors. Firstly, the shared experience of Taliban oppression could serve as a catalyst for cooperation among diverse groups. Secondly, international

pressure and conditional engagement with the Taliban regime might create openings for opposition groups to coalesce around common inclusivity and human rights demands. Developing a new political narrative emphasising national unity over factional interests could also facilitate greater cohesion. However, realizing this potential requires a paradigm shift in how opposition groups conceptualize power-sharing and governance in Afghanistan. It necessitates moving beyond personality-driven politics towards issue-based alliances and cultivating a new generation of leaders unburdened by historical animosities. The implications of a unified opposition extend beyond domestic politics; it could significantly alter the international community's approach to Afghanistan, potentially leading to more coordinated pressure on the Taliban regime. Moreover, a cohesive opposition could provide a viable governance alternative, crucial for future negotiations or political transitions. The success or failure of opposition unification efforts will likely profoundly affect Afghanistan's trajectory, regional stability, and the global approach to engaging with non-state actors in power.

CONCLUSION

This study has critically examined the prospects for achieving positive peace in post-US Afghanistan through the lens of Galtung's theory. The analysis highlights how protracted conflict has been fueled by the interplay of direct, structural, and cultural violence arising from Afghanistan's centralized governance system and ethnic divisions. The Taliban's recent return to power and imposition of their fundamentalist ideology have perpetuated the cycle of oppression, human rights abuses, and systemic marginalization of non-Pashtun ethnic groups. The key finding is that political decentralization offers a viable pathway to dismantle the root causes of conflict and transition Afghanistan toward positive peace. By devolving power to regional or provincial levels, a decentralized model can accommodate the Taliban's desire for Sharia-based governance in areas under their influence while enabling other groups to exercise autonomy aligned with their values. However, several critical hurdles must be overcome.

Firstly, the Taliban's ideological resistance to power-sharing and the fragmentation among opposition forces impede progress towards an inclusive political settlement. As our analysis of anti-Taliban groups revealed, the opposition landscape is divided into political, value-based, and military factions, each facing unique challenges in cohesion and strategy. This fragmentation significantly hampers the formation of a unified front capable of effectively negotiating with or challenging the Taliban regime or offering a prospect for an alternative to the Taliban regime. Secondly, any decentralization framework must enshrine robust protections for human rights, including women's rights, freedom of expression, and minority

rights, to prevent oppression and discrimination. The value-based opposition, comprising civil society organizations and human rights activists, could play a crucial role in advocating for these protections within a decentralized system.

Finally, international pressure through incentives like recognition and economic assistance or punitive measures such as sanctions will be crucial in compelling the Taliban to uphold its commitments. The international community's stance will also significantly influence the ability of opposition groups to coalesce and present a viable alternative governance model. While this study offers insights into the complexities of the Afghan conflict, it is limited by the rapidly evolving dynamics on the ground and potential shifts in regional and global geopolitics. Future research should closely monitor developments and explore additional peacebuilding mechanisms beyond decentralization, such as disarmament, demobilization, reintegration programs, truth and reconciliation processes, and economic development initiatives.

Ultimately, achieving sustainable peace in Afghanistan necessitates a paradigm shift from the Taliban's exclusionary policies towards a pluralistic, decentralized model that respects the rights and aspirations of all Afghan citizens. Overcoming the hurdles will require sustained international and regional engagement and consensus, unwavering commitment to human rights, and a willingness to embrace inclusive governance from all stakeholders. This includes addressing the ideological divergences, leadership vacuum, and strategic disagreements identified among opposition groups, which currently hinder the formation of a cohesive alternative to Taliban rule. Only through such a comprehensive approach, which acknowledges the complex tapestry of opposition forces and seeks to bridge their divides, can Afghanistan overcome the legacies of violence and pave the way for positive peace, stability, and prosperity for its long-suffering people. The potential for unification among diverse anti-Taliban factions, coupled with a decentralized governance model, may hold the key to breaking the cycle of conflict and moving Afghanistan beyond the mere absence of war towards a truly inclusive and peaceful future.

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