Administrative Reconfiguration in Nangarhar Province under Taliban Rule Post-2021

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Abstract

This paper examines the administrative changes in Nangarhar Province after the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan in August 2021. This paper employs a qualitative research methodology, incorporating interviews with local officials, administrators, scholars, and journalists, to examine how the Taliban reformed provincial administrative systems, dismantled existing governance structures, and established new institutional frameworks consistent with their ideological model. Research reveals that essential state agencies, including the Human Rights Department, Public Affairs Department, and Ministry of Women's Affairs, were dismantled and supplanted by entities such as the Amr Bil Maruf wa Nahi Anil Munkar Department and district assistance centers. The Taliban implemented consolidated appointment procedures, restructured

military and security organizations, and institutionalized religious entities into the governance framework. This study enhances comprehension of the Taliban's administrative governance model and its effects on public service delivery, government legitimacy, and administrative capability in post-2021 Afghanistan.

Keywords: Taliban, Nangarhar, administrative transformation, governance, Afghanistan, institutional restructuring

Introduction

The changes in administrative structures within Nangarhar Province after the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 illustrate a notable shift in the dynamics of local governance. This administrative change should be viewed in the context of Afghanistan's previous attempts at decentralization and the establishment of institutions during the Islamic Republic era. Prior to the Taliban's emergence, Nangarhar functioned under a range of governance frameworks, which included provincial and district councils, election commissions, and specialized administrative entities tasked with overseeing human rights, public affairs, and women's issues. The design of these bodies aims to enhance localized governance, encourage electoral participation, and ensure community representation within a decentralized administrative structure.

Nonetheless, the resurgence of the Taliban in power led to the methodical dismantling of these frameworks. The dismantling of various institutions, including the Provincial Council, District Councils, the Department of Public Affairs, the Administrative Reform Department, the Ministry of Women's Affairs, and several district-level executive management bodies, has taken place. Their roles were either removed or integrated into newly formed administrative entities that embody the Taliban's ideological governance framework, which emphasizes the enforcement of Islamic law (Sharia) and consolidates power under the leadership of the Amirul Momineen (Leader of the Faithful).

Following the dissolution of democratic institutions, the Taliban instituted councils of religious scholars, known as Ulama Councils, at both the

provincial and district levels. The councils currently manage governance and decision-making processes, ensuring that all administrative actions align with the Taliban's interpretation of Islamic principles. Recently established entities comprise the Amr Bil Maruf wa Nahi Anil Munkar Department, which focuses on the promotion of virtue and the prevention of vice, along with district support centers, specialized judicial commissions, and reorganized security agencies, including the State Intelligence Department and the Khalid Bin Waleed Brigade.

The recent transformations signify a shift away from the earlier pluralistic and participatory governance model, prompting important inquiries regarding administrative efficiency, the delivery of public services, and the inclusion of various societal groups. The concentration of authority within entities associated with the Taliban limits avenues for civic participation, political diversity, and the representation of minority groups, thereby consolidating power among leadership that shares a common ideological framework. This reconfiguration may compromise the ability of governance structures to effectively respond to the varied interests of the population in Nangarhar.

Grasping the operational dynamics of these newly established structures is crucial for evaluating their capacity to tackle administrative challenges, uphold public order, and provide services to the community. Although the Taliban have implemented procedural changes, including formalized record-keeping with official seals and documentation, the wider implications of these reforms for the legitimacy and effectiveness of governance remain unclear. This introduction lays the groundwork for an in-depth examination of the administrative changes that have taken place in Nangarhar since 2021, highlighting the various challenges and opportunities that characterize the province's evolving governance framework under Taliban rule.

Literature Review

The transformation of governance and administrative structures in Afghanistan has long been a topic of scholarly interest, particularly in the context of the country's turbulent political history. Since the establishment of Afghanistan as a modern state in 1919, successive regimes have implemented

various governance models, each introducing distinct administrative frameworks and institutional structures. These efforts have ranged from centralized monarchies to republican governments, and most recently, to the Taliban's ideological governance model following their 2021 takeover.

Scholars have consistently emphasized the tension between centralization and decentralization in Afghanistan's governance history. According to Sargand (2019), Afghanistan's governance system has historically been characterized by central control from Kabul, with thirty-four provinces, including strategically significant ones like Kandahar and Nangarhar, operating under centralized administrative oversight. Sargand highlights that decades of war have devastated Afghanistan's administrative infrastructure, limiting the capacity of local governments to deliver services effectively. His research on Kandahar's local governance identifies security challenges, corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, and nepotism as persistent obstacles to effective administration. He further argues that meaningful local participation could improve transparency, efficiency, and service delivery in Afghanistan's provinces.

Shabnam Habib (2013) similarly observes that Afghanistan's attempts to establish modern local governance structures have faced significant challenges. She describes Afghanistan as a site of experimentation with Western-style local governance models, which have struggled to take root due to structural weaknesses and contextual mismatches. Habib argues that while the introduction of modern administrative systems was aimed at promoting decentralized governance, these systems faced operational and legitimacy challenges that undermined their effectiveness.

The debate over centralization versus decentralization is a central theme in the literature on Afghan governance. Lister (2007) in her working paper, "Understanding State-Building and Local Government in Afghanistan," argues that Afghanistan's governance system has historically oscillated between centralized state control and fragmented local governance. She notes that tribal and religious leaders have historically established "micro-societies" that interact with central authorities through patronage and negotiation. This

dynamic has often led to a lack of coherent national governance, with power fragmented across various local actors who prioritize local interests over national integration.

The literature also situates Afghanistan within the broader context of fragile states, characterized by weak institutions, limited governance capacity, and vulnerability to conflict. Scholars argue that effective local governance is essential for state-building and the promotion of stability. Local governments are seen as foundational to the legitimacy of the national government, playing a critical role in service delivery and public administration. However, Afghanistan's ongoing conflict, external interventions, and internal fragmentation have hindered efforts to build resilient local governance structures.

Recent studies on the Taliban's governance model highlight its reliance on centralized, religiously driven administrative structures. Giustozzi (2019) describes the Taliban's governance approach as one that prioritizes ideological conformity and centralized control, often at the expense of institutional capacity and service delivery. Jackson and Amiri (2019) further argue that the Taliban's governance is characterized by an "insurgent bureaucracy" that implements policies through a network of loyalists and religious councils, bypassing traditional administrative structures established under the Islamic Republic.

While these studies provide insights into the Taliban's ideological governance model, they note a significant gap in empirical research on how these changes have affected provincial governance structures in practice. Existing analyses tend to focus on national-level developments, security dynamics, or human rights concerns, leaving the internal workings of provincial administrations under Taliban rule under-explored.

Despite the growing body of literature on Afghanistan's governance challenges, there remains a notable gap in understanding the specific administrative transformations that have occurred in provinces like Nangarhar following the Taliban's 2021 takeover. While scholars have examined the Taliban's ideological motivations and national policy shifts,

little attention has been paid to the practical reconfiguration of administrative institutions at the local level.

This study seeks to fill this gap by providing an empirical analysis of the administrative changes introduced in Nangarhar Province. By documenting the abolition of previous governance structures, the establishment of new Taliban-aligned institutions, and the impact on service delivery and administrative capacity, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the Taliban's governance practices at the provincial level.

Research Objectives, Scope, and Significance

This research aims to explore the transformations in governance within Nangarhar Province following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021. This analysis examines the transformation of the province's essential institutions, which were previously integral to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, focusing on their dismantling, replacement, or reconfiguration. These encompass recognized entities such as the provincial council, election commissions, and a range of government departments that previously offered services to the local community. Concurrently, the study examines the emergence of new administrative frameworks led by the Taliban, including religious councils, the Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, and various commissions that function under the direct oversight of the Taliban's supreme leader. This study goes beyond mere documentation of these changes; it aims to explore their implications for everyday governance. Specifically, it examines how these changes influence service delivery, local decision-making, and the dynamics between citizens and authorities. Particular emphasis is placed on the ways in which these changes have influenced women's involvement in public life, alongside the wider context of civic engagement in Nangarhar.

This study deliberately concentrates on a single province—Nangarhar—and examines a significant period of transition beginning in August 2021. This approach offers a tangible and immediate perspective on the transformation of governance at both the provincial and district levels. This study explores the elimination of entities that were previously regarded as emblematic of

citizen representation and rights, including the Provincial Council, the Ministry of Women's Affairs, and the Human Rights Department. The text examines the Taliban's establishment of new administrative entities designed to uphold their ideological framework, such as religious councils and morality police. A significant area of examination is the centralization of power and decision-making under Taliban leadership, which has far-reaching implications for various sectors, including public services, education, and justice. This study is focused specifically on the local realities of Nangarhar, rather than attempting to encompass national-level developments throughout Afghanistan.

This study holds significant value as it incorporates firsthand accounts and observations from individuals residing and working in Nangarhar. This work illuminates the experiences and perspectives of individuals, providing one of the initial comprehensive analyses of the restructuring of provincial governance under Taliban rule. The findings present valuable and relevant insights for humanitarian organizations, policymakers, and international agencies regarding the current state of governance in this region of Afghanistan. This understanding is crucial for those looking to engage with or support local communities effectively. This study significantly contributes to the existing body of research by addressing a clear gap in our understanding of local governance in the context of conflict and regime change, particularly in situations involving non-democratic authorities. The study notably highlights the effects of these changes on individuals, especially regarding the diminishing opportunities for women and civil society. Through the documentation of these realities, the aim is to enrich the ongoing discussions surrounding rights, representation, and the prospects for inclusive governance in Afghanistan.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the transformation of administrative structures in Nangarhar Province following the Taliban's return to power in 2021. The qualitative approach enables an in-depth examination of complex governance changes that are difficult to

quantify but critically important to understand in the context of Afghanistan's evolving political and administrative environment.

Research Design

The research is structured as a qualitative case study focusing on Nangarhar Province. This design is appropriate for exploring localized governance transformations within the broader national context of Afghanistan. The study focuses on identifying and analyzing the replacement of previous governance structures with Taliban-imposed administrative frameworks, examining how these changes impact administrative functions and governance dynamics at the provincial level.

Data Collection

The data collection process relied on both primary and secondary data sources:

- Primary Data:

    The primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 40 participants divided into four categories:

    - 10 government officials

    - 10 political leaders

    - 10 administrators

    - 10 academicians

- These participants were chosen for their direct involvement in or knowledge of the governance systems in Nangarhar. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for flexibility in exploring various themes, ensuring that the perspectives of the respondents were captured in their own words.

- Secondary Data:
   The study also utilized secondary sources such as official documents, scholarly articles, and prior research on governance and administrative structures in Afghanistan. These materials provided additional context for analyzing the data collected from the interviews.

Sampling Techniques

A convenience sampling method was employed to select participants who were accessible and willing to share their insights on the administrative transformations in Nangarhar. This method enabled the researcher to gather diverse perspectives from individuals positioned at various levels of the governance structure, providing a comprehensive understanding of the changes that had taken place.

Data Analysis Technique

Thematic analysis was used to process the qualitative data collected through interviews. This involved several stages:

1. Familiarization with Data:
    The researcher reviewed the interview transcripts multiple times to gain a deep understanding of the content.

2. Identification of Themes:
    Recurring patterns and themes related to administrative changes, such as the abolition of previous institutions, the introduction of new structures, and the impact on governance, were identified.

3. Coding and Categorization:
    Relevant segments of the data were coded and organized into thematic categories for analysis.

4. Synthesis and Interpretation:
    The coded data were synthesized to provide insights into the collective experiences and observations of the participants regarding administrative transformations in Nangarhar.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly adhered to throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after explaining the purpose of the study and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time. The identities of all respondents were anonymized to protect their privacy, and the data were securely stored to prevent unauthorized access. These measures ensured that the research was conducted with integrity and respect for the participants' confidentiality and safety.

Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in the theory of political and administrative transformation, which provides a lens for understanding how governance systems undergo radical changes in response to shifts in political power. This framework was essential for contextualizing the Taliban's administrative restructuring efforts within broader patterns of institutional change in conflict-affected states.

Analysis and Discussion

The administrative transformation in Nangarhar Province following the Taliban's return to power in 2021 reveals a radical restructuring of governance institutions, personnel, and procedures. Drawing from interviews with key stakeholders—including government officials, journalists, scholars, and politicians—this section presents a thematic analysis of how administrative functions have been redefined under Taliban authority.

Abolition of Previous Administrative Institutions

Respondents unanimously confirmed that the Taliban abolished key governance bodies that previously played critical roles in public administration and participatory governance. Institutions such as the Provincial Council, Election Commission, and the Directorate of Women's Affairs were dismantled without replacement by any elected or participatory mechanisms. This action represented a rejection of the decentralized and consultative administrative frameworks that characterized the former Islamic Republic. One respondent stated, "There are no elections, no women's offices, no civil society organizations. Everything was shut down".

This sweeping abolition eliminated channels for local input and representation, signaling a return to centralized control. The dismantling extended beyond formal institutions to the dismissal of personnel previously affiliated with the republic-era governance structures, indicating a complete administrative overhaul designed to align with Taliban ideological standards.

Establishment of New Governance Frameworks

In place of the abolished structures, the Taliban instituted new governance frameworks centered around Islamic councils (Shuras) and commissions reporting directly to the Amir al-Momineen. Respondents described the formation of Ulama Councils at both provincial and district levels. These bodies hold administrative and oversight authority across all sectors of governance.

According to interview data, these councils are composed of individuals selected by Taliban authorities, often with a religious or ideological background rather than technical expertise. This ideological vetting of appointments reflects the Taliban's emphasis on Sharia-based governance and centralized decision-making. One scholar interviewed described these structures as "non-representative but completely authoritative in nature," noting their role in enforcing uniformity across departments and reducing bureaucratic pluralism.

Centralization of Decision-Making

Another dominant theme that emerged is the centralization of all administrative decisions. Whereas previous provincial administrations had some autonomy and could recommend appointments or adjust procedures locally, the Taliban regime imposes decisions from the center. Appointments of governors, district administrators, and even technical staff are now made directly by central Taliban leadership in Kandahar.

Respondents indicated that this model has suppressed local flexibility and eliminated negotiation between provincial and national levels. As one administrator noted, "There is no voice from Nangarhar in deciding its future. Everything comes from above". This system mirrors the governance

structure during the Taliban's previous rule (1996–2001), further emphasizing ideological continuity and authoritarian administrative culture.

Reconfiguration of Administrative Roles

The Taliban's administrative transformation also entails redefining the functions of civil servants. Respondents highlighted that many technical departments—including education, public health, and agriculture—now operate under the supervision of Taliban-appointed monitors or clerics who may lack sectoral experience. This has compromised administrative efficiency, with one former official commenting, "The managers are changed; professionals are replaced by those who are ideologically trusted".

This reconfiguration has also affected coordination across departments. The replacement of technocrats with religious figures often disrupts workflow and communication, particularly where policy formulation requires specialized expertise. Nonetheless, supporters of the new system argue that the changes bring discipline and ideological consistency to the administration.

Implications for Service Delivery

Stakeholders consistently expressed concern that the Taliban's administrative structure has reduced the capacity of government offices to deliver services effectively. The exclusion of women from all roles and the lack of local input have further weakened institutional performance. A respondent from the public health sector observed that the closure of women's departments has left "half the society invisible in planning and outreach".

Others pointed to deteriorating infrastructure management and education oversight, noting the withdrawal of international NGOs and the collapse of donor-driven administrative programs. The bureaucratic vacuum has not been adequately filled by Taliban offices, leading to fragmentation and declining public satisfaction with services.

Suppression of Civic Engagement and Oversight

The administrative transformation has also led to the near-total suppression of civic engagement. Civil society organizations and independent monitoring bodies—once instrumental in ensuring transparency—have been disbanded. Respondents emphasized that there is now no oversight over administrative

actions, and grievances are handled through informal mechanisms that lack accountability.

Public feedback mechanisms have disappeared, and district-level administrators operate in isolation from citizens. As one participant explained, "Previously, people had offices to go to. Now, even if your rights are violated, there's no institution to hear you". This erosion of accountability further entrenches authoritarian administrative norms.

Gendered Impact of Administrative Restructuring

Women have been the most significantly affected group under the new administrative system. With the closure of the Directorate of Women's Affairs and the prohibition of women from working in public offices, half the population has been excluded from administrative processes. This has curtailed not only employment but also access to services, particularly in health, education, and family welfare.

Interview data show that the few remaining administrative channels for women have been informal, unreliable, and subject to Taliban discretion. The absence of institutional support has exacerbated social inequality and undermined development outcomes across key sectors.

Conclusion

The administrative framework of Nangarhar Province has experienced significant and extensive transformations in the wake of the Taliban's ascendance to power in 2021. A significant change that has been observed is the complete reorganization or elimination of essential governance institutions that functioned under the former republic. For instance, the Provincial Council, which previously functioned as an elected entity representing local communities and managing provincial administrative matters, has been disbanded. The functions and powers have been delegated to officials appointed by the Taliban, with critical positions now occupied directly by Amir al-Momineen. The centralization of appointments in Nangarhar's administration has supplanted democratic representation with a model of top-down leadership.

The Taliban have restructured governance within the judicial and legal sectors by eliminating prosecutorial authorities and integrating their functions into court systems appointed by the Taliban. The oversight of these courts has shifted away from the Ministry of Justice, now functioning within a religious framework governed by Taliban judges. This change effectively aligns the justice system with the Taliban's interpretation of Sharia law.

In a comparable manner, the State of Women's Affairs—a vital institution dedicated to the advancement of women's rights—has been completely dismantled. The shutdown of women's affairs offices, peace houses, and associated services has created a notable gap in gender representation and advocacy, indicating a serious regression in women's involvement in public and political life in Nangarhar Province.

Although certain administrative entities, including the Commission for Administrative Reforms, remain operational, their functions have significantly decreased. Other departments, including the Supervision Department for Educational Oversight, have been completely dissolved, resulting in staff being either reassigned to unrelated positions or integrated into the Taliban's newly established administrative frameworks. The recent reorganization has also impacted educational institutions, including Darul-e-Mulammin, which previously played a crucial role in training school teachers. Its abolition raises concerns about the potential decline in educational standards and the capacity for teacher training within the province.

The dissolution of the Provincial Independent Election Commission and the Complaints Redressal Commission illustrates the Taliban's dismissal of electoral systems and the frameworks for public accountability that were put in place during the republic era. The disbanding of these institutions indicates a significant shift away from participatory governance, moving towards a model that emphasizes centralized, non-electoral decision-making directly overseen by Taliban leadership.

The administrative changes implemented by the Taliban in Nangarhar illustrate a thoughtful and methodical restructuring of governance aimed at strengthening their control, minimizing democratic engagement, and aligning

institutional goals with their ideological and administrative principles. The alterations in the operational framework of state institutions have brought about considerable social and political ramifications. These include a decline in electoral accountability, the sidelining of women, and a constriction of priorities in education and public services.

As Nangarhar and Afghanistan as a whole adapt to this new governance reality, the enduring effects of these administrative changes will significantly influence the province's governance capacity, social stability, and citizen engagement. Ongoing research and observation will be crucial for comprehending the evolution of these transformations and their implications for the wider socio-political context in Afghanistan.

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