Afghanistan:
Elite Tensions, Peace Negotiations, and the COVID Crisis

WILLIAM MALEY*

Afghanistan has experienced more than four decades of severe disruption, ever since the communist coup of April 1978 plunged the country into a state of disorder that was then severely aggravated by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. Despite the high hopes that accompanied the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001, Afghanistan's path in the first two decades of the 21ˢᵗ century has proved to be anything but smooth, and this article highlights a confluence of challenges – political, diplomatic, and societal – that Afghanistan presently faces, challenges that in large measure account for the profound uncertainty that clouds its future. The article is divided into four sections. The first provides some context for the discussion of these three challenges. The remaining sections investigate the particular challenges – intra-elite rivalries, a fragile and defective peace process, and the underreported but grave threat to life and limb in Afghanistan resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic – in more detail. Together, these challenges highlight the dangers of wishful thinking about harsh realities.

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* Dr. WILLIAM MALEY is Professor of Diplomacy at the Australian National University.

Introduction

Afghanistan has experienced more than four decades of severe disruption, ever since the communist coup of April 1978 plunged the country into a state of disorder that was then severely aggravated by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979.[1] The war of the 1980s, pitting Soviet and regime forces against Islamic resistance groups known collectively as the *Mujahideen*,[2] cost hundreds of thousands of lives, led to the displacement as refugees of millions of Afghans, and caused grave damage both to Afghanistan's infrastructure and to human capital formation. The withdrawal of Soviet forces by 1989, as a result of the advent of Mikhail Gorbachev to power in the USSR in 1985, did not bring peace to the country.[3] The communist regime finally collapsed in April 1992; the capital city Kabul became the focus of contestation between antagonistic *Mujahideen* groups;[4] and finally, in September 1996, the Taliban movement, armed and supported by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence directorate (ISI), succeeded in taking over the Afghan capital.[5] The Taliban, however, failed to secure either genuine popularity or international legitimacy. They were displaced in October-November 2001 by a U.S.-led intervention following the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States orchestrated by Al-Qaeda, whose leader, Osama bin Laden, was based in Afghanistan where he had received hospitality from the Taliban.

Despite the high hopes that accompanied the overthrow of the Taliban regime, Afghanistan's path in the first two decades of the 21st century has proved to be anything but smooth, and the aim of this article is to highlight a confluence of challenges – political, diplomatic, and societal – that Afghanistan presently faces, challenges that in large measure account for the profound uncertainty that clouds its future. The article is

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[1] On the events of this period, see Anthony Arnold, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion in Perspective* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1985); Henry S. Bradsher, *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1985); Rodric Braithwaite, *Afgantsy: The Russians in Afghanistan 1979-89* (London: Profile Books, 2011); William Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars* (London: Macmillan/Red Globe Press, 2021).

[2] See Olivier Roy, *Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Abdulkader H. Sinno, *Organizations at War in Afghanistan and Beyond* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

[3] On the withdrawal, see Amin Saikal and William Maley (eds), *The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Artemy M. Kalinovsky, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); Rodric Braithwaite, "The Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan," in *At the End of Military Intervention: Historical, Theoretical, and Applied Approaches to Transition, Handover and Withdrawal*, ed. Robert Johnson and Timothy Clack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[4] See Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 57-100.

[5] Anthony Davis, "How the Taliban Became a Military Force", in *Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban*, ed. William Maley (London: Hurst & Co., 1998).

divided into four sections. The first provides some context for the discussion of these three challenges. The remaining sections investigate the particular challenges – intra-elite rivalries, a fragile and defective peace process, and the underreported but grave threat to life and limb in Afghanistan resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic – in more detail. Together, these challenges highlight the dangers of wishful thinking about harsh realities.

The debilitation of the state was one of the factors that opened the door for the Pakistan-backed Taliban to seize control of Kandahar in 1994, Herat in 1995, and finally Kabul in 1996. The *talib*, or religious student, was long a familiar figure around the northwest frontier of India, and in the 1980s, some of these religious students mobilised against the Soviet invaders. The Taliban *movement*, however, was rather less spontaneous, having been instrumentalised at the instigation of Major General Naseerullah Babar, interior minister in the government of Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto. While echoes of village values could sometimes be detected in the discourses of individual Taliban,[6] the movement was pathogenic rather than traditional, and drew for its shock-troops on exiles more likely to have grown up in refugee camps than in Afghan villages, as well significant numbers of non-Afghans.[7] These pathogenic origins meant that the Taliban movement was strikingly lacking in the pragmatism that often marks village life, and the leaders preached a highly-twisted version of the Deobandi school of Islam, stripped of the moderation that was to be found in its originators in British India.[8] It reflected a distinctively totalitarian mindset, but not a Leninist form of organisation: it was rather, to quote the analyst Thomas Ruttig, a network of networks.[9]

The Taliban regime showed no interest in developing anything resembling modern political institutions, and thus when it was overthrown by the United States and its allies in 2001, Afghanistan had a dire need for a process by which new state institutions could be designed and legitimated. This came about through the Bonn conference of November-December 2001 at which non-Taliban Afghan political actors reached an agreement to establish an interim administration, to be upgraded to a transitional administration, which would then preside over the drafting of a new constitution, which finally took effect in 2004. When a country has suffered as much as Afghanistan has, there are unlikely to be easy solutions to problems that have accumulated and solidified over a very long period of time, and it is therefore important that measures to assist

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[6] Anand Gopal and Alex Strick van Linschoten, *Ideology in the Afghan Taliban* (Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network, June 2017).

[7] Ahmed Rashid, "The Taliban: Exporting Extremism," *Foreign Affairs* 78, no.6 (1999): 22-35.

[8] See Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

[9] Thomas Ruttig, "How Tribal are the Taliban?," in *Under the Drones: Modern Lives in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Borderlands*, ed. Shahzad Bashir and Robert D. Crews (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

Afghanistan be grounded in reality rather than in public relations strategies. This was a lesson that the US found hard to accept.[10]

Some Context

A complex array of factors contributed to the circumstances that Afghanistan has faced in recent years. One of the most important has been the degrading of the capacities of the state and the diffusion of power to a wide range of actors, something that resulted from the Communist coup and the Soviet invasion. The state was relatively fragile even before 1978 as a result of its excessive dependence on unstable sources of income, which had rendered it a classic "rentier" state,[11] but the advent of communist rulers gave rise to significant problems of legitimacy in a society in which atheistic Marxism was radically at odds with the commitment of the bulk of the population to values shaped by the Islamic faith.[12] In addition, the Marxists within the "People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan" were themselves divided between warring factions, giving rise to severe problems of elite fragmentation.[13] It was little surprise that the loyalties of many components of the Afghan population shifted away from the agencies of the state towards other actors with stronger legitimacy claims than the state proved capable of sustaining. This was not just a problem for the Marxists. Once diverse nonstate actors become focal points for legitimacy, re-legitimation of state structures looms as a long-term problem.

The Bonn conference had already set the scene for a bureaucratically-complex state, by providing for up to 28 departments within the interim administration. The 2004 Constitution then provided for a highly-centralised system, built around a strong presidency.[14] This was to prove highly problematic. The office of president was overloaded, with the president being the symbolic head of state, executive head of government, and a one-person interagency management process. Furthermore, since power was so formally concentrated, the presidential system virtually guaranteed that there would be intense competition for the top office, with a large number of disappointed losers in Afghanistan's complex and multiethnic society. Warnings about

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[10] Lauren Kay Johnson, "I Helped Write the Official Lies to Sell the Afghanistan War," *The Washington Post*, December 14, 2019.

[11] See Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

[12] Amin Saikal and William Maley, *Regime Change in Afghanistan: Foreign Intervention and the Politics of Legitimacy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991).

[13] Anthony Arnold, *Afghanistan's Two-Party Communism: Parcham and Khalq* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1983).

[14] See William Maley, *Rescuing Afghanistan* (London: Hurst & Co., 2006), 30-55.

the perils of presidentialism[15] were overlooked or ignored.

While the new Afghan political system was formally presidential, its practical functioning was significantly shaped by informal considerations, notably the prevalence of political *networks* as crucial devices for the realisation of actors' political objectives.[16] Networks, as defined by Sharan, are "distinct open-hierarchical structures whose members are interdependent on each other's power and resources for political outcomes in an informally structured and continuously renegotiated arrangement."[17] Over time, the emerging instrumentalities of the state became increasingly entangled with such networks, giving rise to a neopatrimonial political system in which nepotism and corruption could flourish.[18] The system was also a product in part of the low levels of civic trust following decades of conflict, and of perverse effects of opium cultivation and foreign aid,[19] but it contributed to major dysfunctionalities in the state, to a failure to entrench the rule of law,[20] and to scandals such as the 2010 collapse of the Kabul Bank.[21]

The development of a neopatrimonial system had significant implications for the conduct of popular elections. In 2004, Hamed Karzai, who had been selected to chair the interim administration in 2001, secured a popular mandate as president with 55.4% of the vote. But times changed, and this became clear at the time of the 2009 presidential election. By 2009, confidence in the direction in which Afghanistan was travelling had waned significantly, as a result of which the presidential election seemed likely to be far more competitive than the first election in 2004. If an incumbent president is dislodged

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[15] Juan Linz, "The Perils of Presidentialism," *Journal of Democracy* 1, no. 1 (1990): 51-69; Matthew Soberg Shugart and John M. Carey, *Presidents and Assemblies: Constitutional Design and Electoral Dynamics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[16] See Niamatullah Ibrahimi and William Maley, *Afghanistan: Politics and Economics in a Globalising State* (London: Routledge, 2020), 53-57.

[17] Timor Sharan, "The Dynamics of Informal Political Networks and Statehood in Post-2001 Afghanistan: A Case Study of the 2010-2011 Special Election Court Crisis,*" Central Asian Survey* 32, no. 3 (2013): 336-352 at 337. See also Timor Sharan, *Dawlat-e shabakahi: Rabeteh-i qodrat wa sarwat dar Afghanistan pas az sal-e 2001* (Kabul: Vazhah Publications, 2017).

[18] See William Maley, *Transition in Afghanistan: Hope, Despair and the Limits of Statebuilding* (London: Routledge, 2018) pp.37-40; William Maley, "Institutional design, neopatrimonialism, and the politics of aid in Afghanistan," *Asian Survey* 58, no. 6 (2018): 995-1015.

[19] See David Mansfield, *A State Built on Sand: How Opium Undermined Afghanistan* (London: Hurst & Co., 2016); Nematullah Bizhan, *Aid Paradoxes in Afghanistan: Building and Undermining the State* (London: Routledge, 2018).

[20] William Maley, "State Strength and the Rule of Law" in *Afghanistan – Challenges and Prospects*, ed. Srinjoy Bose, Nishank Motwani and William Maley (London: Routledge, 2018), 63-77.

[21] Independent Joint Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee, *Report of the Public Inquiry into the Kabul Bank Crisis* (Kabul: Independent Joint Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee, 2012); Joshua Partlow, *A Kingdom of Their Own: The Family Karzai and the Afghan Disaster* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 234-255; Abdul Qadeer Fitrat, *The Tragedy of Kabul Bank* (New York: Page, 2018).

in a neopatrimonial system, it is not the president alone who suffers; those networks that have formed around the president are likely to suffer as well. This created strong incentives for electoral fraud, which occurred on a gargantuan scale in 2009 – finally securing Karzai a second term – and set the scene for further fraud in the elections of 2014 and 2019, where Dr. Ashraf Ghani emerged victorious.[22] The victim of the fraud on each of these three occasions was Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, who had served as Foreign Minister from 2002 to 2006.

Initially, steps had been taken to try to address the risk of electoral fraud. Article 156 of the 2004 Constitution made provision for an "Independent Election Commission" (*Komision-e mustaqel-e entakhabat*), but in a striking measure, an "Electoral Complaints Commission" (*Komision-e shakaiyat-e entakhabati*) was established, with independent international election administrators nominated by the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General comprising a majority of the members. This creative use of "shared sovereignty" greatly increased the likelihood that "losers" would accept the final outcome of electoral processes, but it also contributed to a near-death experience for Karzai in the 2009 presidential elections, when the invalidation by the Complaints Commission of fraudulent votes left Karzai without an absolute majority in the first round of voting. After Dr. Abdullah's withdrawal from the contest, Karzai moved with some haste, in the name of "Afghanisation," to eliminate the international majority on the Complaints Commission. In what was to prove a grave lapse of judgement, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Kai Eide of Norway, agreed that "our transition agenda should include full Afghan responsibility for future elections,"[23] and reportedly told international stakeholders that "the UN had no intention of opposing Afghanization as a principle."[24] The effect of "Afghanisation" in practice was disastrous: it deprived the system of a crucial safety valve,[25] undermined the electoral

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[22] On Afghan elections, see Nils B. Weidmann and Michael Callen, "Violence and Election Fraud: Evidence from Afghanistan," *British Journal of Political Science* 43, no. 1 (2013): 53-75; Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, *Derailing Democracy in Afghanistan: Elections in an Unstable Political Landscape* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); William Maley and Michael Maley, "Appraising Electoral Fraud: Tensions and Complexities," *Conflict, Security and Development* 16, no. 6 (2016): 653-671; Thomas H. Johnson, "The Myth of Afghan Electoral Democracy: the Irregularities of the 2014 Presidential Election," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 29, nos. 5-6 (2018): 1006-1039; Colin Cookman, *Assessing Afghanistan's 2019 Presidential Election* (Washington DC: Peaceworks no.166, United States Institute of Peace, August 2020); Ali Yawar Adili, *Afghanistan's 2019 Elections: A Review of the Disputed Presidential Election and its Aftermath* (Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network, September 28, 2020).

[23] Kai Eide, *Power Struggle Over Afghanistan: An Inside Look at What Went Wrong – and What We Can Do to Repair the Damage* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2012), 249.

[24] "2010 Elections: IEC Announcement, International Views," Cable Reference ID 10KABUL10_a, U.S. Embassy, Kabul, January 3, 2010.

[25] For a wider discussion of the value of electoral assistance, see Inken von Borzyskowski, *The Credibility Challenge: How Democracy Aid Influences Election Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

process as a device for political legitimation, and severely aggravated the problem of elite fragmentation. Afghan elections have been bitterly fought and deeply divisive ever since.

All these problems perhaps would have been manageable had it not been for the progressive resurgence of insurgency within Afghanistan over the best part of two decades, largely fuelled by Pakistan, which for geopolitical reasons of its own provided sanctuaries, training, and equipment to the Taliban. In the immediate aftermath of the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001, the movement was in considerable disarray.[26] The distraction provided by the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, however, provided the Taliban with an opportunity to regroup, especially from 2005: one senior Taliban leader stated that "Pakistan removed all the restrictions and we told all Taliban members that Pakistan does not want to arrest us, they want to support us."[27] The consequences for ordinary Afghans were grave: in the period from 2007-2019, the UN recorded 25,751 civilian deaths in the conflict at the hands of anti-government elements, or 66 percent of all such deaths.[28] The Taliban also mounted mass-casualty attacks against civilian targets in Kabul, often using vehicles packed with explosives.[29] Such attacks were plainly acts of terrorism, defined by Richards as "a method that entails the use of violence or force or the threat of violence or force with the primary purpose of generating a psychological impact beyond the immediate victims or object of attack for a political motive."[30] The insurgency was not driven by widespread normative support: in a 2019 Asia Foundation survey of opinion in Afghanistan, 85.1 percent of respondents stated that they had no sympathy at all for the Taliban.[31] Nonetheless, with violence blighting their daily lives, many Afghans by 2020 were beginning to feel not just despairing, but increasingly desperate at their plight.

Finally, complicating all these factors was the loss of interest in Afghanistan on the part of successive US administrations. This began with the invasion of Iraq; some years later, Admiral Michael G. Mullen, Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, stated that "In Afghanistan, we do what we can. In Iraq, we do what we must."[32] There could have been no clearer indication of the drift in focus to which Afghanistan had fallen victim. This problem was aggravated during the presidency of Barack Obama. It was very clear, very early, that President Obama had no desire to see his agenda of reform undermined

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[26] Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban/Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan, 1970-2010* (London: Hurst & Co., 2012), 219-260.

[27] Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War, 2001-2018* (London: Hurst & Co., 2019), 53.

[28] See Ibrahimi and Maley, *Afghanistan*, 75; Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars*, 274.

[29] See, for example, Mujib Mashal, Fahim Abed and Jawad Sukhanyar, "Deadly Bombing is Among Worst of Afghan War," *The New York Times*, June 1, 2017.

[30] Anthony Richards, *Conceptualizing Terrorism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 146.

[31] *Afghanistan in 2019: A Survey of the Afghan People* (Kabul: The Asia Foundation, 2019), 69.

[32] Robert Burns, "Mullen: Afghanistan Isn't Top Priority," *The Washington Post*, December 11, 2007.

by a foreign war in the way that the Vietnam War had eaten away at the foundations of Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency. He pursued a contradictory policy, in which US ground activity in Afghanistan escalated, but with the identified intent of withdrawing the bulk of US forces within a specified period.[33] Designed in part to focus President Karzai's mind on governing seriously,[34] it simply allowed the armed opposition to sit out the escalation and await the period of "transition" (*inteqal*) that ultimately saw the bulk of international forces withdrawn from Afghanistan by the end of 2014. When Donald Trump took over the presidency, he made no attempt to disguise his isolationist proclivities, which became very obvious when the Trump Administration in 2018-2020 bypassed the Afghan government, a major non-NATO ally of the US, to sign an agreement on February 29 2020 with the Taliban. The labelling of the agreement as an "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan" (*Mowafeqatnamah-e awardan-e saleh be Afghanistan*) could not disguise the reality that it was an exit agreement. Nothing could have been better calculated to add to the challenge posed by intra-elite rivalries, to which I will now turn.

Intra-elite Rivalries

At the outset, it is important to understand that there is nothing particularly unusual about division within political elites. While it is relatively common for observers to bemoan a lack of "unity" within Afghanistan's national political elite, in significant respects this simply highlights the relative pluralism of the Afghan political environment of the 21st century. Intra-elite rivalries become a source of danger when they involve contestation over the fundamental rules of the political game, or if they lead to violence in the streets, as one witnessed with the activities of the Nazi *Sturmabteiling* (SA) paramilitary in the early 1930s in Weimar Germany. In the aftermath of the controversial 2014 presidential election, a "National Unity Government" was established, as a result of significant US pressure, which remained in place nominally until the 2019 poll. It was riven by tension and did not work especially well, but the relations between the key figures in the government, President Ashraf Ghani and "Chief Executive Officer" Dr. Abdullah Abdullah remained civil, if not exactly cordial, and probably less tense than those between President Trump and the Democrats after the November 2020 US elections. But that said, key reforms promised to Abdullah in the agreement that established the National Unity Government never materialised, and as time passed, the relations between the different camps deteriorated noticeably. And it took nearly eight

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[33] See Maley, *Transition in Afghanistan*, 209-215.
[34] Barack Obama, *A Promised Land* (London: Viking, 2020), 443.

months from the September 2019 election to strike anything like a workable agreement between the two leading candidates, Ghani and Abdullah.

It is tempting to see the challenge of intra-elite rivalries simply or primarily in terms of rivalries between these two individuals. But that would be superficial and simplistic. Political figures such as Dr. Ghani and Dr. Abdullah found themselves nested within wider networks of supporters who aligned themselves with such leaders in the context of norms of solidarity and reciprocity which meant that their concerns could not be ignored. This was especially the case with a figure such as Dr. Abdullah, who did not have the advantage of incumbency. In the early years after 2001, when Ghani was the finance minister and Abdullah the foreign minister, they actually worked quite cooperatively when circumstances so required. But they were not natural allies, having trodden very different life-paths. Dr. Abdullah, by training an ophthalmologist, was a close associate of the famous *Mujahideen* commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, of ethnic Tajik background, whose stronghold in the 1980s was the Panjsher Valley north of Kabul. By contrast, Dr. Ghani was of Ghilzai Pushtun background, and during the 1980s was an academic in the United States prior to working as a senior social scientist with the World Bank. They thus reflected the diverse backgrounds – *mujahid* versus emigré technocrat – of those who took office after 2001, and their own networks of associates tended to reflect this schism as well.

In addition to this schism, Afghanistan's national political elite has also been divided on the question of what institutional structures and approaches might work best for Afghanistan, and this division has to a certain degree reflected differences between the Pushtun and non-Pushtun elements of the wider population. While it is dangerous to overgeneralise, key figures amongst the Pushtuns have often supported a centralised rather than decentralised model of the state, and a presidential rather than a parliamentary system, whilst significant non-Pushtuns have tended to prefer a decentralised model with a strong parliament rather than a strong presidency. These differences were prominently on display during the constitutional drafting process in 2003-2004, and remain a source of stress within the political system. A formally-strong presidency in a formally-centralised state tends to give politics a "winner-take-all" character, which is one reason why disputes over electoral fraud at presidential elections have proved so ferocious.

This problem has been aggravated by the development of a neopatrimonial system. A formally-strong presidency in a formally-centralised state makes the presidential palace potentially a crucial asset in determining how offices – so-called "positional goods"[35] – and contracts are distributed during the course of a president's term. This

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[35] See Russell Hardin, *One for All: The Logic of Group Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 57.

can give rise to an even more combustible situation if ethnic entrepreneurship begins to emerge. In Afghanistan, ethnic identifications are complex,[36] but it can be very tempting for a leader to seek to appoint members of his own *ethnie* to positions of significance. If and when this happens, other groups can take offence and mobilise to resist such developments. One result can be a flourishing of "contentious politics," in which activists who feel that they have little chance of securing their interests through formal political channels seek to use protests and demonstrations as tools for interest articulation.[37] A more dangerous result can be the formation of militias, designed to function as self-protection forces for individuals or groups who feel that they have been excluded from a share of political power, and that the state cannot be trusted to provide them with security. Afghanistan has not quite reached the point at which such a development comes to represent a fundamental threat to the stability of the state; but there is certainly a risk that this could happen as the result of a misconceived "peace process."

What makes this a potent issue is the phenomenon of "warlordism." The very term is controversial, since it can be deployed as part of a rhetorical strategy by which some political actors seek to delegitimise competitors.[38] Nonetheless, it serves as a reminder that whilst the Afghan state formally is highly centralised, Afghan political actors *de facto* include regional and local strongmen who may enjoy a degree of legitimacy in the eyes of members of particular communities that gives to them a salience that they might not otherwise enjoy. Recent nuanced studies have demonstrated that simplistic characterisations that seek to depict strongmen as intrinsically in opposition to the state need to be treated with considerable caution.[39] "Warlords" have displayed a remarkable capacity to survive in the face of challenges.[40] But that said, a "peace process" that seemed poised to hand significant formal powers to the Taliban could well be a trigger for such actors to dust off their weapons in order to defend what they see as their core interests. This is a real danger that Afghanistan now faces.

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[36] See Conrad Schetter, *Ethnizität und ethnische Konflikte in Afghanistan* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2003).

[37] See Ibrahimi and Maley, *Afghanistan*, 61-67.

[38] Keith Stanski, "'So These Folks are Aggressive': An Orientalist Reading of 'Afghan Warlords'," *Security Dialogue* 40, no. 1 (2009): 73-94.

[39] See Dipali Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords as Bureaucrats: The Afghan Experience* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 2009); Dipali Mukhopadhyay, *Warlords, Strongman Governors and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[40] Romain Malejacq, "Warlords, Intervention, and State Consolidation: A Typology of Political Orders in Weak and Failed States," *Security Studies* 25, no. 1 (2016): 85-110; Romain Malejacq, "From Rebel to Quasi-State: Governance, Diplomacy and Legitimacy in the Midst of Afghanistan's Wars (1979-2001)," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 28, nos. 4-5 (2017): 867-886; Romain Malejacq, *Warlord Survival: The Delusion of State Building in Afghanistan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

The "Peace Process"

In 2020, as a result of the February 29 agreement, Afghanistan found itself – allegedly – in the middle of a "peace process." Normally one would think that only good could flow from a peace process, but this process came to pose a significant challenge for Afghanistan. On the ground, violence continued to stalk the lives of ordinary people, notwithstanding the commencement of discussions on September 12, 2020 in Doha between the Taliban and a delegation from the Afghan government. This stood as a stark reminder that "peace" can be an elusive phenomenon in a society rent by deep schisms at the elite level, and severe trauma at the mass level. It should also prompt the reflection that past efforts at bringing about peace in Afghanistan had virtually never had the effects for which the architects had hoped. This was especially the case with the April 1988 Geneva Accords on Afghanistan, signed by representatives of the Government of Pakistan and the communist regime in Kabul, and witnessed by the United States and the USSR. The UN Secretary-General, Javier Perez de Cuellar, argued at the time that the Accords "lay the basis for the exercise by all Afghans of their right to self-determination, a principle enshrined in the Charter."[41] This was precisely what the Accords *failed* to do, leaving unaddressed the deep differences that separated the Communist regime from its *Mujahidee*n opponents.[42] Years of bitter conflict were to follow.

One feature that cast a shadow over the Afghanistan "peace process" from the very outset was the willingness of the United States from 2018 to engage directly with the Taliban – a player armed by, and crucially dependent on, a foreign patron, Pakistan[43] – while excluding the Afghan government from the process. This was a longstanding demand from the Taliban, and it gave them a precious seat at the table with the United States, in exchange for nothing. To find a comparable precedent for such exclusion, it is necessary to turn to the Munich conference of September 1938, in which the future of the Czechoslovak Republic was canvassed by Hitler, Mussolini, Chamberlain, and Daladier in the absence of any Czechoslovak representatives. The sacrifice of Czechoslovak interests in the Munich agreement did not bring peace, but rather set the scene for the occupation of Prague in March 1939 and the outbreak of the Second World War with the German invasion of Poland on September 1 that year. On the eve of the invasion, Hitler remarked "Our enemies are small worms. I saw them

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[41] *Agreements on Settlement of Situation Relating to Afghanistan* (Geneva: United Nations Information Service, Press Release Afghanistan/9, April 14, 1988).

[42] See William Maley, "The Geneva Accords of April 1988," in *The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan*, ed. Amin Saikal and William Maley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 12-28.

[43] See Theo Farrell and Michael Semple, "Making Peace with the Taliban," *Survival* 57, no.6 (2015-2016): 79-110 at 92.

in Munich."[44] Here one finds highlighted one of the dangers to which Afghanistan is now exposed: inadvertently, the United States signalled that its approach to negotiation would be supine rather than robust. In sending such a signal, it virtually invited the Taliban to wait for further concessions, rather than contemplate any concessions of their own.

The framing of the peace process also proved to be a contributing factor to problems. In 2017, a well-connected former US official defined the problem to be addressed as "vested interests on all sides in continuing the war," arguing that Washington could influence the Taliban's calculations through "applying military pressure and offering political opportunity" and "using our leverage with the Afghan political elite to ensure their commitment to negotiating."[45] There are, of course, all kinds of vested interests at play in Afghanistan, but such a reductionist approach overlooks the fundamental gulf in *values* that separates the Taliban and a new generation of Afghans strongly committed to a more pluralist "republican" model of politics, even if the actual practice of politics in Kabul since 2001 has fallen short of such an ideal. This is especially problematic when one is talking about values that are grounded in religious beliefs, and there is evidence from comparative analysis suggesting that disputes based on religious claims are particularly intractable.[46] Such value-conflicts cannot simply be wished away. Bargaining and brokerage techniques that might succeed in bridging the gulf between parties when only interests are involved can be much less efficacious when serious conflicts in values are on the table.

The mischaracterisation of the Afghan conflict simply as a struggle between vested interests was symptomatic of a wider problem that afflicted the negotiation process, namely a lack of deep understanding of the complexities of the Taliban and Taliban decision-making. On the one hand, from the Taliban's time of dominance from 1996 to 2001, analysts have access to a large volume of evidence about how the Taliban behaved when they had access to at least some levers of state power, even though the state in the late 1990s was extremely debilitated. But as to the internal politics of the Taliban, much remains deeply obscure. In 2010, Western powers held discussions with a "senior Taliban leader," only to learn that the man with whom they had engaged was an imposter,[47] reportedly a grocer from Quetta. Even more strikingly, the founding leader of the Taliban, Mullah Omar, died of natural causes in April 2013, but it took more than

[44] Quoted in Tim Bouverie, *Appeasing Hitler: Chamberlain, Churchill and the Road to War* (London: The Bodley Head, 2019), 297.

[45] Laurel Miller, "A Peace 'Surge' to End War in Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, July 23, 2017.

[46] Thérése Pettersson, Stina Högbladh, and Magnus Öberg, "Organized violence, 1989-2018 and peace agreements," *Journal of Peace Research* 56, no. 4 (2019): 589-603.

[47] Dexter Filkins and Carlotta Gall, "Taliban Leader in Secret Talks Was an Imposter," *The New York Times*, November 22, 2010; Joshua Partlow, "Karzai aide blames British for bringing Taliban imposter to talks," *The Washington Post*, November 26, 2010.

two years for the news to leak out,[48] and as late as December 2014, a respected analyst could write that "Mullah Omar remains the Taliban supreme leader and the source of all authority in the movement."[49] The lesson here is that we know considerably less about the internal operations of the Taliban than we would like to think.

Beyond this lurks another problem. In the 19th century, Lord Acton famously warned that power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. This serves as a reminder that what the Taliban might say about how they would behave if they obtained access to state power is a very poor guide to how they might actually behave. In the 1990s, as the Taliban expanded through different parts of Afghanistan, a narrative surfaced that depicted them as pure students, uninterested in political power, and concerned only with ridding the country of predatory warlords. This fed into a vision of a stable Afghanistan in which reconstruction would be funded by revenues from oil and gas pipelines built through the country by Western corporations exploiting the stability that the Taliban had provided. Zalmay Khalilzad, later the principal negotiator for the Trump Administration, argued that "once order is established, concerns such as good government, economic reconstruction and education will rise to the fore."[50] This was not how things worked out.

This history helps explain why a number of groups in Afghanistan have felt deeply apprehensive about the prospect that the Taliban might find themselves anywhere near power in the future. Whilst many individuals have suffered at the hands of the Taliban, two particular groups have good reason to feel fearful. One is Afghan women. The policies that the Taliban applied to Afghan women in the second half of the 1990s reflected highly-stereotypical views on gender that had deeply-repressive consequences, and while it is a considerable mistake to see Afghan women simply as passive victims rather than as repositories of agency,[51] many would not like to repeat the experience of earlier times and see it as a looming peril. The Taliban delegation that began to negotiate in Doha in September 2020 consisted entirely of men, and in response to measures to ensure that the name of a person's mother could be included on an Afghan citizen's identity card, a Taliban spokesman reportedly stated that "From a religious point of view, the names of women are among the prohibitions that cannot be mentioned anywhere … Mentioning the names of mothers, wives, sisters and daughters is not

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[48] Carlotta Gall, "Mullah Muhammad Omar, Enigmatic Leader of Afghan Taliban, Is Dead," *The New York Times*, July 31, 2015.

[49] Michael Semple, *Rhetoric, Ideology, and Organizational Structure of the Taliban Movement* (Washington DC: Peaceworks Report no.102, United States Institute of Peace, December 2014), 17.

[50] Zalmay Khalilzad, "Afghanistan: Time to Reengage," *The Washington Post*, October 7, 1996.

[51] See Nivi Manchanda, *Imagining Afghanistan: The History and Politics of Imperial Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 143-179.

culturally tolerable in our society."[52] The other group with strong grounds for fear are Shiite Hazaras. In August 1998, the Taliban in Mazar-e Sharif carried out a massacre of Hazaras that the writer Ahmed Rashid described as "genocidal in its ferocity,"[53] and this is not something that Hazaras have forgotten.

The way in which the "peace process" was structured also gave rise to problems. Initially, the stated position of the United States when it engaged with the Taliban was the familiar diplomatic formula that "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed." This is a readily-defensible approach to negotiation since it signals that provisional offers may become firm only in the event that they are matched by reciprocal concessions. For example, using such an approach, a provisional US offer to withdraw troops could have been conditioned on a ceasefire by the Taliban. But faced with Taliban obstreperousness, the US negotiator, Zalmay Khalilzad, buckled, and moved in 2019 to a *radically*-different model of negotiations, namely one in which there would be first a bilateral US-Taliban agreement, and only then some kind of "intra-Afghan negotiations."[54] The consequences of the shift were catastrophic. By envisaging intra-Afghan negotiations only *after* the conclusion of a US-Taliban agreement, the new approach created a classic perverse incentive for the Taliban to engage in the further use of violence against *Afghan* targets, with a view both to seizing as much territory as possible before intra-Afghan negotiations reached a critical point, and to demonstrating a capacity to wreak mayhem if the Taliban did not get their way at the negotiating table. The US concession on this critical point also sent the signal that the US could be taken for granted, and was prepared to abandon its Afghan allies for the sake of an exit deal. Unsurprisingly, the February 29 agreement contained no requirement for a ceasefire, was completely silent on the issue of Taliban sanctuaries in Pakistan, and contained no provisions to protect human rights or a democratic order in Afghanistan.

A similar signal was sent by a particularly disturbing element of the February 29 agreement, namely the provision for the release of up to 5000 "combat and political" Taliban prisoners held by the Afghan government. This provision, seemingly inserted at the last minute,[55] was an affront to Afghan sovereignty, and furthermore had the potential to deprive the Afghan government of a key bargaining card in any future negotiations with the Taliban. Under intense US pressure, the Afghan government agreed to release some prisoners, but then found that Washington was prepared to

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[52] Orooj Hakimi and Storay Karimi, "In the name of the mother: Afghan woman wins recognition, sparks Taliban opposition," *Reuters*, September 23, 2020.

[53] Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 73.

[54] See Mujib Mashal, "Confusion over Afghan-Taliban talks further complicates peace process," *The New York Times*, July 27, 2019.

[55] Tom Malinowski, "Trump's peace deal with the Taliban is a sham. Here are two honest alternatives," *The Washington Post*, March 7, 2020.

demand even more than the February 29 agreement required. Thus, while the agreement provided for a *ceiling* to releases ("up to" 5000 prisoners), the US accepted the Taliban demand to treat this as a *target*; and while the agreement provided for the release of "combat and political" prisoners, the US went along with Taliban demands for the release of convicted criminals as well.[56] Reports soon surfaced of released prisoners returning to the battlefield.[57]

For defenders of the "peace process," perhaps the strongest argument in its favour was that it would deliver the Taliban to the table to negotiate with the Afghan government.[58] But underpinning this line of reasoning was a questionable assumption, namely that the Taliban would be interested in negotiating seriously with the Afghan government. There were four reasons to be highly sceptical about such an assumption. First, the Taliban had never shown any interest in negotiating with the Afghan government, which they routinely described as a puppet; and the February 29 agreement did not even refer to the Afghan government by name, instead talking about "Afghan sides." Second, the Taliban in the February agreement had secured almost all of their key objectives – status, a timetable for the US troop withdrawal, and a commitment to release Taliban prisoners – and as Francis Bacon famously remarked in his essay "Of Negotiating", it "is better dealing with men in appetite, than with those that are where they would be."[59] Third, the absence of any provision for a ceasefire in the February 29 agreement left the Taliban with a military option intact, making it less likely that they would be prepared to offer meaningful concessions to reach an agreement. Fourth, the manifest reluctance of the US to apply any pressure at all to the Taliban again left them in the comfortable position of being able to meet the very limited demands of the February 29 agreement without having to offer any significant concessions in return during the course of the intra-Afghan negotiations.

With the commencement on September 12, 2020 of "intra-Afghan negotiations," another problem came into view, namely the scope for stalling to which the process gave rise. It is a mistake to think that parties that engage in negotiation processes are necessarily focused on securing a constructive outcome. On the contrary, they may take part in negotiations as a way of avoiding other pressures, or to create the impression of constructive engagement, or simply to eat up time as they prepare to take some other initiatives. When this occurs, the result is typically an *illusion* of active diplomacy. Delegations may appear to be fully engaged, purporting to seek instructions from

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[56] Abdul Qadir Sediqi, "Australia, France object to release of final Taliban prisoners: officials," *Reuters*, August 17, 2020.

[57] Lynne O'Donnell, "Defying Peace Deal, Freed Taliban Return to Battlefield," *Foreign Policy*, September 3, 2020.

[58] Laurel Miller, "Will the U.S.-Taliban Deal End the War?," *The New York Times*, February 18, 2020.

[59] Francis Bacon, "Of Negotiating," in Francis Bacon, *The Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 203.

their principals, or undertaking media interviews and giving off-the-record briefings. But it may all be for show, and it is important for observers not to be deluded into mistaking this for progress. Once the intra-Afghan negotiations began, it became clear the two kinds of stalling were at play. The Afghan government, which had little trust in Khalilzad or the Trump Administration, had an incentive to engage in *tactical* stalling in order to see what the result of the November 3, 2020 US presidential election might be. Much more seriously, however, the Taliban had an interest in *strategic* stalling, finding ways of avoiding serious negotiation by advancing procedural demands that no Afghan government could easily accept, and that delayed the opening of more substantive discussion for nearly three months.

These concerns might seem academic if it were not for the fact that perceptions of what is happening in a peace process can feed back into the real world of politics in a country such as Afghanistan. Thomas Hobbes famously remarked that "reputation of power, is power."[60] The effect of the Afghanistan "peace process" was to undermine the reputation of the Afghan government and boost the reputation of the Taliban. The danger is that in combination with Taliban military activities, this could be the trigger for a "cascade," where power holders in Afghanistan realign themselves with the Taliban not because they either like the Taliban or want them to come to power, but simply because they think it is something which is going to happen anyway and that it is not wise to be on a losing side.[61] It was a cascade that brought down the communist regime in April 1992, sweeping away a UN peace plan in the process. It is a danger of which members of the current Afghan political elite remain acutely aware, and given intra-elite rivalries, it could infect the Afghan political elite as well.

COVID-19 in Afghanistan

The emergence in China in late 2019 of the SARS-CoV-2 virus triggered the global COVID-19 pandemic. In the first identified case of a death in Afghanistan as a result of this virus, a 40-year old Afghan man died on March 19, 2020 of an acute respiratory infection in Chimtal District in the Province of Balkh. As a country afflicted by the pandemic, Afghanistan has received far less attention than other countries which the virus has ravaged, notably the United States, Brazil, Italy, Spain, France, United Kingdom, and India. Yet the effects of the disease in Afghanistan have been devastating. Anyone with friends in the country is aware that elderly Afghans have been dying in very large

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[60] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 62.
[61] On the phenomenon of cascades, see Timur Kuran and Cass R. Sunstein, "Availability Cascades and Risk Regulation," *Stanford Law Review* 51, no. 4 (1999): 683-768.

numbers, to the point where one journalist remarked that the busiest enterprises were those involved in coffin manufacture and gravedigging. It is useful therefore to conclude this discussion of challenges that Afghanistan faces with some observations about the implications of COVID-19.

In the last two decades, Afghanistan has been one of the countries most affected by globalisation. Many of these effects have been positive, but it is now more exposed to globalised dangers than ever before in its history, and one of these dangers is the spread of pandemic disease. The relatively-porous border between Afghanistan and Iran was likely the point at which the SARS-CoV-2 made its way into Afghanistan,[62] and once it arrived, it began its exponential spread. As of late November 2020, approximately 44,000 cases in Afghanistan had been confirmed in Afghanistan, and 1600 deaths.[63] These official figures, however, grossly underestimated the real scale of the problem, not because of any negligence in data collection on the part of the Ministry, but simply because its testing capacity was so limited: by late September, testing laboratories had been established only in Kabul and six other provinces (out of 34), and at a border crossing.[64] A study by economist William Byrd, however, has painted a vastly more alarming picture. Drawing on several sources, he estimated "that 100-200,000 Afghans had died from the pandemic by the beginning of August," and observed that "the calculations of Covid deaths made here strongly suggest that in 2020 the disease has been responsible for an order of magnitude more deaths than all the civilians killed in the war in Afghanistan since 2001. Indeed, Covid deaths are probably already higher than all war-related deaths – including combatants – during this nearly 20-year period."[65] Byrd goes on to identify serious economic consequences of the pandemic for Afghanistan: falling output, an increased budget deficit, and a sharp increase in the poverty rate.

Two particular vulnerabilities are important to note at this point. First, the public health system in Afghanistan remains significantly underdeveloped, despite some sterling efforts by various doctors and officials in the last two decades. This underdevelopment serves as a reminder that Afghanistan is a very poor country, where world-class medical facilities are accessible only to a small number of people. A victim of COVID-19 who requires intubation and ventilation to survive is unlikely to do so, simply through lack of access. Where developing countries have succeeded in avoiding disaster, it has typically been because high levels of "social capital" have resulted in early preventive

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[62] David D. Kirkpatrick, Farnaz Fassihi and Mujib Mashal, "'Recipe for a Massive Viral Outbreak': Iran Emerges as a Worldwide Threat," *The New York Times*, February 24, 2020.

[63] Sophie Cousins, "Afghanistan braced for second wave of COVID-19," *The Lancet* 396, no.10264 (2020): 1716-1717 at 1716.

[64] Rohullah Sorush, *Covid-19 in Afghanistan (6): A closer look at the MoPH's official figures* (Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network, September 24, 2020).

[65] Bill Byrd, *Covid-19 in Afghanistan (8): The political economy repercussions of Covid-19 and the aid response* (Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network, October 14, 2020).

measures so that reliance on a relatively weak health system has been avoided: Timor-Leste provides a remarkable example. Second, many Afghans, especially those who have moved recently to cities, live economically-marginal lives where what they earned during the day pays for the food that they eat in the evenings. "Social distancing" in such a situation becomes very difficult or runs the risk of tipping people from a position of food insecurity to one of truly acute peril, especially if the prices of basic goods begin to rise sharply as output falls.

It is important to recognise one other critical point: that the threat posed by the pandemic is not one that should be measured simply in terms of mortality, but also in terms of *morbidity*. It has been widely documented that the mortality risks associated with COVID-19 rise sharply with age.[66] Afghanistan has a young population, with some 24,559,262 Afghans, or 74.6 percent of the total population, estimated on June 1, 2020 to be under the age of 30.[67] This has led some to think that Afghanistan might enjoy a "margin of safety" when faced with the COVID-19 threat, but this line of reasoning does not take into account the growing evidence of long-term morbidity that can result from infection with the SARS-CoV-2 virus.[68] While it is too early to offer any definitive assessments, there is a risk that young Afghans who have survived the pandemic may be faced with significant long-term health problems that blight their lives in diverse ways.

The outlook for Afghanistan and for Afghans thus appears to be a sombre one, and the problems discussed in this article cast a deep shadow over the country's future. The dysfunctional rivalries within the political elite have weakened the political system as a tool for dealing effectively with some of the most critical challenges that Afghanistan faces. The "peace process" has failed to deliver even a semblance of peace, and arguably has weakened the government, strengthened the Taliban, and incentivised the intensified use of violence by the Taliban and Islamic State. These problems – of political dysfunction and intensified insurgent violence – have come to a head at the very time when the threat of pandemic disease is so grave that any compromising of the capacity of the state to respond will inevitably have tragic human consequences.

The high hopes of 2001, when the overthrow of the Taliban was widely celebrated, have long since faded, and Afghans now fear that they will be left on their own to cope with the daunting confluence of challenges that this article has discussed. It is thus all the more important to emphasise in conclusion that the vast bulk of ordinary Afghans

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[66] Smriti Mallapaty, "The Coronavirus is most deadly if you are old and male," *Nature* 585, September 3, 2020, 16-17.

[67] *Estimated Population of Afghanistan 2020-2021* (Kabul: National Statistics and Information Authority, June 2020), 3.

[68] Jody W. Zylke and Howard Bauchner, "Mortality and Morbidity: The Measure of a Pandemic," *JAMA* 324, no. 5 (2020): 458-459; Michael Marshall, "COVID-19's lasting misery," *Nature* 585, September 17, 2020, 339-341; Pam Belluck, "Covid Survivors With Long-Term Symptoms Need Urgent Attention, Experts Say," *The New York Times*, December 5, 2020.

bear no responsibility for the problems with which they are confronted, problems that have taken shape in the realms of politics and diplomacy in a globalised world. If the future remains bleak, more young Afghans will likely seek to leave the country, and their claims for protection as refugees will likely be well-founded.[69] In the 1980s, a young Afghan said to the novelist Doris Lessing, "We cry to you for help, but the wind blows away our words."[70] Those who in more recent times promised not to abandon the Afghans need to remember their promises.

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[69] See William Maley, *What is a Refugee?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).
[70] Doris Lessing, *The Wind Blows Away Our Words* (London: Pan Books, 1987).

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