

## Analyzing State-Nation Building in Fragmented Societies: A Case Study of Afghanistan (2002-2021)\*

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### ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the process of state-nation building in Afghanistan's fragmented society between 2001 and 2021, focusing on the key challenges encountered. Employing an analytical-complementary approach and qualitative data drawn from desk research, the study highlights Afghanistan's historical struggle with structural and identity-related obstacles to nation-building. Following the 2001 U.S.-led intervention and with international support, efforts were initiated to establish a democratic and participatory state. However, the centralization of power and the failure to recognize ethnic diversity significantly impeded the creation of a stable nation-state. The findings indicate that meaningful progress requires structural reforms, institutional strengthening, and the genuine inclusion of all ethnic groups. Recommended measures include transitioning toward a decentralized governance model, combating corruption, and redefining national identity. Overall, Afghanistan's experience over the past two decades underscores that without embracing ethnic pluralism, consolidating independent institutions, and adopting an inclusive nation-building strategy, sustainable stability will remain elusive.

**Keywords:** State-nation building, fragmented society, Identity diversity, decentralization, Afghanistan.

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## Parçalanmış Toplumlarda Devlet-Ulus İnşasının Analizi: Afganistan'ın Bir Vaka Çalışması (2002-2021)

### ÖZ

Bu çalışma, 2001–2021 yılları arasında Afganistan'ın parçalanmış toplumunda ulus-devlet inşası sürecini ve karşılaşılan temel zorlukları incelemektedir. Analitik-tamamlayıcı bir yaklaşım ve masa başı araştırmalarına dayanan nitel veriler kullanılarak gerçekleştirilen bu çalışma, Afganistan'ın tarihsel deneyimlerinin ulus-devlet inşasında her zaman yapısal ve kimlik temelli zorluklarla karşılaştığını ortaya koymaktadır. 2001'de ABD öncülüğündeki müdahale ve uluslararası toplumun desteğiyle demokratik ve katılımcı bir devlet kurma yönünde çabalar başlatılmıştır. Ancak, iktidarın merkezileşmesi ve kimlik çeşitliliğinin tanınmaması, istikrarlı bir ulus-devletin inşasını önemli ölçüde engellemiştir. Bulgular, anlamlı bir ilerlemenin yapısal reformlar, devlet kurumlarının güçlendirilmesi ve tüm etnik grupların gerçek katılımını gerektirdiğini göstermektedir. Önerilen çözümler arasında adem-i merkezîyetçi bir yönetim modeline geçiş, yolsuzlukla mücadele ve ulusal kimliğin yeniden tanımlanması yer almaktadır. Genel olarak, Afganistan'ın son yirmi yıllık deneyimi, etnik çoğulculuğu benimsemeden, bağımsız kurumları güçlendirmeden ve kapsayıcı bir ulus inşa yaklaşımı geliştirmeden kalıcı istikrara ulaşılamayacağını göstermektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Ulus-devlet inşası, parçalanmış toplum, kimlik çeşitliliği, merkezîyetsizlik, Afganistan.

### 1. Introduction

The modern nation-state is a European phenomenon that emerged alongside the development of modernity, particularly with the rise of capitalism. In Europe, bureaucratic and financial reforms, combined with economic growth, facilitated the transition from feudalism to capitalism (Tilly, 1992: 14). However, in peripheral societies, the process of nation-state building has often been shaped and driven by political elites (Wallerstein, 1974: 66–88). While some countries have successfully established modern nation-states through modernization and institutional development, this process has largely failed in multi-ethnic societies such as Afghanistan. The crisis of nation-state building in Afghanistan dates back to the country's founding in 1747 and continues to the present day. Rather than forming a government with a broad national base, successive Afghan governments have prioritized consolidating power within specific ethnic groups (Rubin, 2002: 15–17). The imposition of ethnic identity and a centralized system of governance has not only obstructed the creation of a modern nation-state but has also deepened social divisions, undermined national solidarity, and perpetuated political and security crises. As a result, Afghanistan's multi-ethnic social structure and centralized political system remain major obstacles to effective state-building.

This research examines the nation-state building process in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021. This period was selected because it represents a decisive chapter in Afghanistan's modern history, beginning with the U.S.-led intervention that toppled the Taliban regime and ending with the withdrawal of international forces and the Taliban's return to power. These two decades mark the most intensive and internationally supported attempt to establish a stable and democratic nation-state in Afghanistan, involving large-scale political, military, and developmental interventions. The study systematically addresses the following research questions: Why has the nation-state building process remained incomplete in Afghanistan? What have been the primary obstacles to its success? How have ethnic diversity and the post-2001 political structure impeded this process? And why did this nation-state building project ultimately fail despite two decades of foreign intervention?

To contextualize this research, several key works have been reviewed, each addressing state-building and nation-building in Afghanistan from different perspectives. State Formation in Afghanistan: A

Theoretical and Political History by Mujib Rahman Rahimi (2017) critiques the official narrative of state-building from a postmodern and postcolonial perspective, arguing that it has been predominantly shaped by the Pashtun elite and influenced by British colonial knowledge. However, this work has been criticized for its selective use of data, neglect of internal factors, and excessive reliance on Persian and Arabic sources. In comparison, the present study adopts a more comprehensive approach. *The Roots of the Failure of Nation-Building and State-Building in Afghanistan* by Aziz Aryanfar (2016) examines the failure of state-building and offers policy recommendations, but it has been criticized for lacking theoretical and methodological coherence and for the influence of personal and ideological biases on its analysis. This study seeks to address these limitations by employing a rigorous scientific framework. *American Nation-Building: A Comparison of Iraq and Afghanistan* by Mirwais Balkhi (2020) explores the role of the United States in nation-building efforts in both Afghanistan and Iraq, focusing on direct U.S. involvement, leadership in state modernization, political development, and the top-down nation-building model. However, this work has been criticized for its heavy reliance on official U.S. narratives, its failure to incorporate local perspectives, and its insufficient examination of internal factors. In contrast, the present research analyzes state-nation building in Afghanistan without bias toward Western narratives, considering both internal and external influences. *Afghanistan and the Modern State* by Abdul Ali Mohammadi (2015) focuses on the legal dimensions of state formation, arguing that existing laws are insufficient for establishing a modern state. However, its purely legal approach overlooks the political and social dimensions of state-building. Unlike Mohammadi's work, this study adopts political and social science perspectives rather than being confined to legal frameworks. Similarly, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan* by B.D. Hopkins focuses less on state-building and more on the political economy of the British Empire and its impact on the region. Covering only a brief period of Afghan history, it lacks a comprehensive analysis of the nation-state building process. In contrast, this study aims to provide a holistic and multidimensional analysis of the factors shaping state-building in Afghanistan. Additionally, several important studies conducted in Turkey have examined Afghanistan's state- and nation-building processes, particularly focusing on Turkey's foreign policy and engagement in Afghanistan. Scholars such as Özkan (2011), Erşen (2014), and Aydın and Açıkmış (2007) have analyzed Turkey's contribution to Afghanistan's stabilization efforts, emphasizing its soft power approach, development aid, educational initiatives, and military training missions. While these works offer valuable insights into Turkey's role and motivations, they often focus primarily on Turkey's diplomatic and strategic interests, paying less attention to Afghanistan's internal structural and identity-related challenges. Building on this existing literature, the present study primarily focuses on the domestic dimensions of state- and nation-building in Afghanistan and seeks to provide a more comprehensive and multidimensional analysis of the Afghan experience.

In summary, while the reviewed studies, research, and articles examine state-building from different perspectives, they reveal certain limitations, such as one-sided viewpoints, historical and political biases, and an overly narrow focus on legal or economic aspects. This study aims to offer a more comprehensive analysis by integrating various political science approaches. As an applied research project, its findings are intended to inform policy reforms in Afghanistan's state-nation building process. Methodologically, the study employs an analytical and integrative approach, identifying key challenges and proposing potential solutions. Data were collected using qualitative methods, particularly through documentary analysis of books, reports, and academic sources. This methodological framework allows for a deeper exploration of the historical, social, and political factors shaping state-nation building, while addressing the shortcomings of earlier one-dimensional studies.

## **2. Theoretical Framework: Modern Nation State and State- Nation Building Models in Fragmented Society**

The state is a central concept in this study, and its definition remains complex and multifaceted. As a result, providing a precise definition of the state has always been challenging. Easton (1971: 106-115) acknowledges this difficulty, stating that “the state is an ambiguous, fluid, and complex concept that is difficult to define.” Among various perspectives, Weber’s definition is widely regarded as the dominant consensus among scholars regarding the key elements of the state. According to Weber, “the state is a human institution that has a monopoly on the legitimate use of coercive power within a given territory” (Weber, 1946: 78).

Another essential concept in this research is nation-state building, a multidimensional process that encompasses institution-building, peace-building, and nation-building. Scholars have emphasized different aspects of this process. Fukuyama (2004: ix) views it as the enhancement of state capacity, while Brinkerhoff (2005) associates it with the reconstruction of legitimacy, security, and governance in post-conflict societies. Research centers like RAND link nation-state building to the establishment of civil order and the improvement of state institutions in countries affected by crises (Pan, 2003).

A further key concept in this study is fragmented society, which refers to “societies that face deep historical, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and identity divisions, often accompanied by a bloody past marked by political supremacist struggles” (Rahimi, 2018: 42). These societies are often plagued by political struggles aimed at ethnic or ideological supremacy, which further exacerbates internal divisions. The diversity of ethnic and linguistic structures in such societies has disrupted the process of nation-state formation and led to tragic events. Examples include apartheid in South Africa, ethnic cleansing in Europe (including the killing of Jews in Germany and the expulsion of Germans from Poland after World War II), the genocide of the Tutsi in Rwanda, and ethnic wars in Afghanistan (Rezaei, 2015: 100).

State- Nation building in fragmented societies characterized by ethnic, religious, and linguistic diversity is among the most complex challenges in political science. In such societies, social and political divisions, coupled with the inability of elites to form coalitions, are the primary obstacles to the processes of nation-state building, peace-building, and the establishment of a democratic political order. Therefore, in the process of nation-state building in these societies, it is essential to recognize the legitimacy of the state among different groups and ensure the fair distribution of resources and power. Historical evidence suggests that nation-state building in such societies has typically followed three major models, which will be explored further in this study.

The assimilation model is one of the approaches to nation-state building, where the state attempts to create a single national identity and place ethnic groups into a unified framework (Yinger, 1985: 30). This model is typically implemented through the promotion of the official language, educational reforms, strengthening national symbols, and, in some cases, repressive policies (Barth & Noel, 1972: 336). In democratic societies, this process is carried out peacefully and gradually, as seen in post-revolutionary France, which established a unified national identity through the promotion of the French language and national symbols (Shakdam, 2018: 15). However, in authoritarian systems, states often use violence and repression to impose national unity, as seen in the suppression of the Kurds in Iraq by Saddam Hussein (Premdas, 2002: 16-35) or the case of Yugoslavia, which, despite efforts to manage ethnic diversity, ultimately faced internal conflicts and disintegration (Sabzalei, 2011: 817-818).

Another model of nation-state building in fragmented societies is the pluralist model. The pluralist model emphasizes the acceptance of ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity, allowing groups to belong to a territorial nation-state while preserving their identities (Marger, 1992: 163). This model is primarily implemented in democratic and liberal societies that emphasize equal rights, the rule of law, and political participation. Its two main forms are egalitarian pluralism (which ensures equal status for groups) (Peterson, 1980: 31) and unequal pluralism (where power is unevenly distributed) (Kuper & Smith, 1969: 11). Successful examples of this model can be seen in countries like Switzerland, Canada, the United States, and India. However, in some of these countries, challenges such as separatism and inequality in resource distribution continue to pose significant obstacles to the pluralist model of nation-state building (Hajiani, 2001: 122).

One more model is the unity-in-plurality model, which stresses the integration of cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity with national unity. Unlike the assimilation model, which imposes a single identity, the unity-in-plurality model recognizes differences and emphasizes the creation of a common national identity through the participation of all groups. This model prioritizes collective and group rights over individual interests, aiming to foster national cohesion through equal opportunities, voluntary participation, and social justice (Nourmohamadi, 2024: 212). The two key policies in this model are the politics of difference, which accepts fundamental differences between the majority and minorities, and the politics of recognition, which acknowledges the identity of minorities (Nazari & Sazman, 2015: 117). Successful examples of this model can be observed in Belgium, Singapore, and South Africa. This model aims to strengthen social cohesion and political stability in multi-ethnic societies by embracing diversity and creating equal opportunities for all groups.

Ultimately, state-nation building in multi-ethnic societies requires a delicate balance between strengthening national solidarity, respecting the rights of different groups, and preserving cultural diversity. The success of nation-state building, therefore, depends on the state's ability to balance national unity, social justice, and respect for cultural diversity, ensuring stability in multi-ethnic societies.

### **3. Afghanistan: Fragmented Society, State Development, and the Context of State-Nation Building**

Afghanistan, located in Central and South Asia, covers an area of 652,230 km<sup>2</sup> and is composed of 34 provinces (Wilayat), with its capital in Kabul. Afghanistan is a fragmented and ethnically diverse society, home to 55 ethnic groups that speak 45 different languages (Summer Institute of Linguistics). Morgenstern (1929) referred to Afghanistan as "a linguistic and ethnic treasure trove," while Barfield (2010) described it as "a paradise of languages." The latest constitution of Afghanistan officially recognizes fourteen ethnic groups, with the Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks being the principal ethnic groups and having historically held significant political influence. Max Klimburg has classified the ethnic groups of Afghanistan into three broad categories.

**Figure 1.** Social Structure of Afghanistan

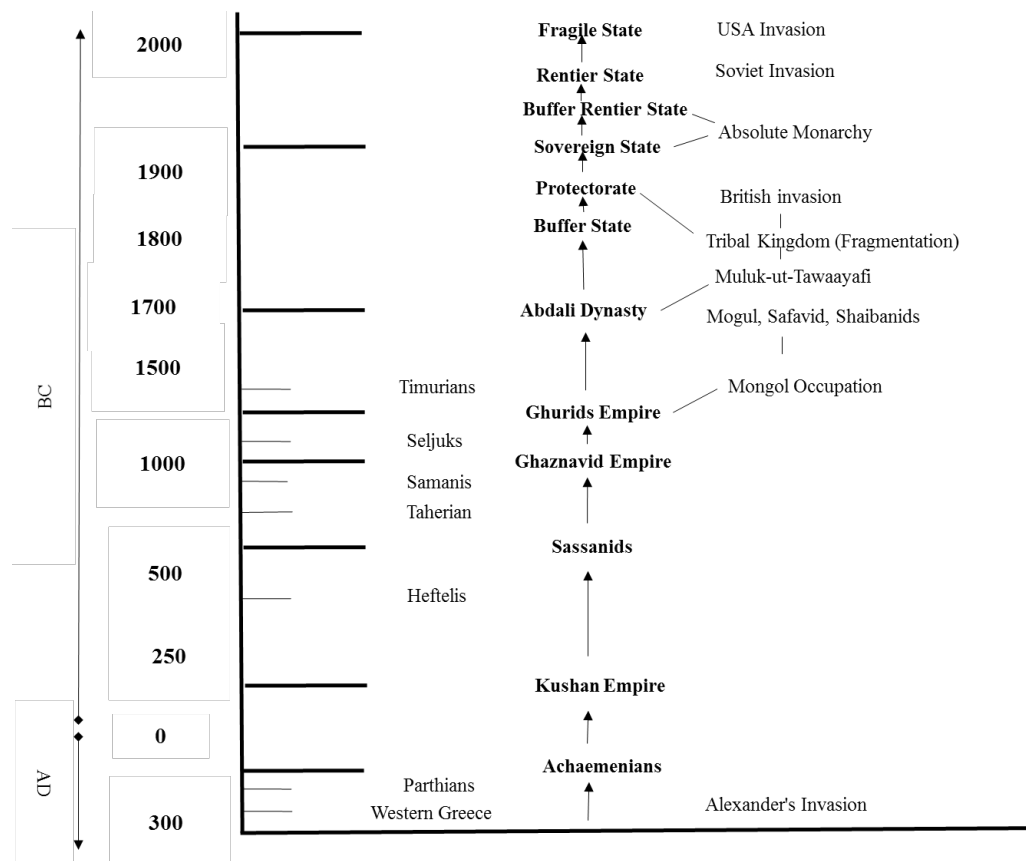
Ethnic Group		Language	Religion
Iranian Ethnic Groups	Pashtuns	Pashto	Sunni & Shia
	Tajik	Persian	Sunni
	Aimaq	Persian	Sunni
	Baloch	Balochi	Sunni
Turkic and Mongolian Ethnicity	Uzbeks	Uzbek	Sunni
	Turkmen	Turkmen	Sunni
	Hazara	Persian	Shia & Ismaili
	Kyrgyz	Kyrgyz	Sunni
	Qizilbash	Persian	Shia
Indian Ethnic Groups	Nuristanis	Nuristani	Sunni
	Pashai	Pashai	Sunni
	Sikh & Hindu	Punjabi	Sikhism Hinduism

Source: (Fröhlich, 1970: 192-193)

As illustrated in the figure above, the ethnic groups of Afghanistan are categorized into three broad groups: the Iranian group, which includes Pashtuns, Tajiks, Aimaqs, and Baluchis; the Turkic and Mongol group, which includes Uzbeks, Turkmen, Hazaras, Kyrgyz, and Qizilbash; and the Indian group, which includes Nuristanis, Baluchis, and Sikh-Hindus (Fröhlich, 1970: 192-193). It is important to note that Baluchis are mentioned in both the Iranian and Indian groups due to their diverse historical and cultural affiliations. Linguistically, Afghanistan is a highly diverse country with numerous dialects. However, Persian (Dari), Pashto, Uzbek, and Turkmen are the most widely spoken languages. Despite this linguistic diversity, accurate demographic statistics on Afghanistan's ethnic composition are unavailable, and various sources present differing and often scientifically unreliable figures.

The historical background of state formation in Afghanistan indicates that before the emergence of a quasi-modern centralized state, this region was under the dominion of overlapping and borderless empires and local monarchies. Political authority was divided among khans, mirs, local kings, and imperial rulers, each exerting influence over different territories (Sadr, 2021: 123-124). After the fall of the Achaemenid Empire (550-330 BC), multiple ruling entities emerged in the region. Several dynasties governed Afghanistan at different historical periods, including the Kushans, Yuezhi-Hephthalites (Yaftals), Tahirids, Safavids, Samanids, Ghaznavids, Ghurids, Seljuks, and Timurids (Sadr, 2021: 124).

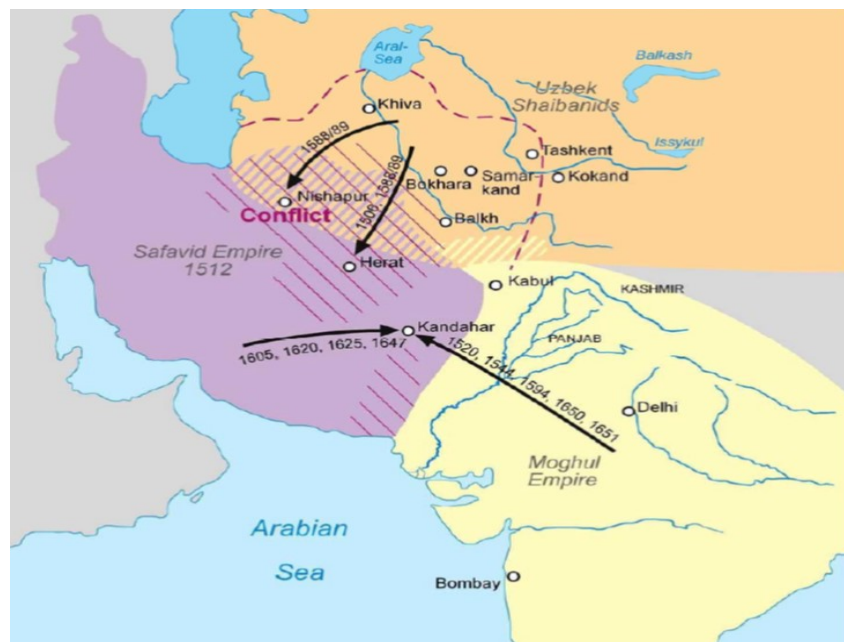
**Figure 2. State Development in Afghanistan**



Source: (Kohistani, 2009: 21)

As shown in the figure above, the territory that is now Afghanistan was ruled by various empires and regional governments before the formation of an independent state. The region was part of larger empires that primarily controlled lands in modern-day India, Iran, and Central Asia. Following the collapse of the Timurid dynasty in Herat in 1506, Afghanistan was divided among three empires: the Mughal Empire (Indo-Mongol), the Safavid Empire, and the Uzbek Shaybanids. This division persisted until 1747 (Banuazizi, 1986: 25). This period, known as "Frontier Feudalism" (1500-1747), was marked by Afghanistan's lack of a distinct political identity, with the region serving as a contested battleground between the Safavids, the Mughals, and the Uzbek Shaybanids (Olesen, 1995: 21).

**Map 1.** *Afghanistan before the Durrani Dynasty (16th century)*



Source: (Kohistani, 2009: 48)

As shown in the map above, the northern regions of Afghanistan were under the rule of the Shaybanids, the west was influenced by the Safavids, and the south and southeast were dominated by the Mughal Empire. Over more than two centuries of competition between regional powers and internal conflicts among feudal units, these struggles laid the foundation for political self-awareness and the politicization of ethnicity in Afghanistan (Daheshyar, 2008: 8).

In the 18th century, Afghanistan entered a new phase of state development. The Pashtun Durrani dynasty initially emerged as a tribal federation and later evolved into a quasi-modern state (Sharan, 2016: 63). A century after the formation of the modern international system in Europe (1648), Afghanistan saw the emergence of its first independent political authority (Daheshyar, 2009: 1052). This period, known as the period of Durrani rule and expansion (1747–1800) (Shahrani, 1986: 25), began after the death of Nader Afshar, which created a power vacuum. Ahmad Shah Abdali, one of Nader's commanders, was able to establish the Durrani Confederation in 1747. This government dominated Afghanistan until 1800. Through numerous military campaigns, Ahmad Shah established and expanded his empire from Central Asia to the Arabian Sea, consolidating his power. Some historians have referred to it as "the largest empire in the region after the Ottoman Empire" (Rasanayagam, 2007: 22).



**Map 2.** Territories of the Durani Confederation



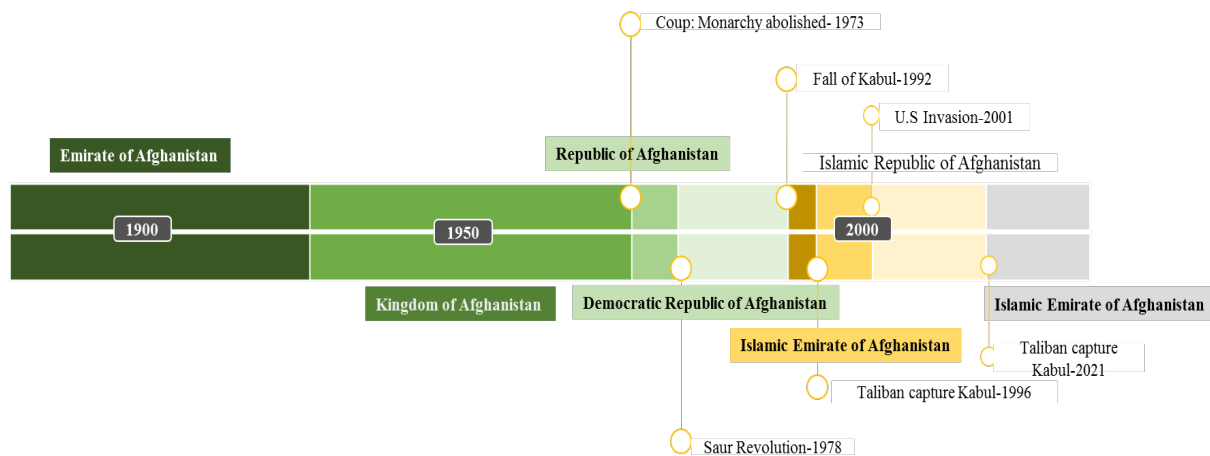
Source: Karimi, 2020

At its height, the Durrani Confederation, founded by Ahmad Shah Abdali, encompassed regions from Nishapur to New Delhi and from Balkh and Bukhara to the Indian Ocean (Karimi, 2020). The confederation lasted for 26 years, and its political structure was primarily based on tribal leaders and landowning families. Ahmad Shah's reign was marked by devastating wars, including the massacre of thousands at the Battle of Panipat and the widespread destruction of Sikh temples. His pursuit of power intensified internal conflicts within Afghanistan (Manaqbi, 2021).

After Ahmad Shah's death, Timur Shah Durrani ascended to the throne and moved the capital from Kandahar to Kabul. He ruled for 20 years, during which he faced internal rebellions. Timur Shah was eventually poisoned in Peshawar due to an internal conspiracy (Shahrani, 1986: 32). Following his death, internal disputes within the Durrani dynasty, combined with the rise of regional powers such as the Qajars in Iran and the British in India, accelerated the gradual collapse of the Durrani Empire. Conflicts among Timur Shah's descendants plunged Afghanistan into chaos, and by 1880, a large portion of the Durrani Empire's territories had been lost (Ghbar, 1999: 378).

From the late 19th century, Afghanistan became an arena of competition between Tsarist Russia and Britain. Russia annexed northern Afghanistan, while Britain brought the southern regions under its influence, weakening the country and turning Afghanistan into a geopolitical buffer (Cullather, 2002). Despite gaining independence in 1919, Afghanistan remained a buffer state between the two powers until 1955 (Wafayezada, 2013: 95). In the 20th century, Afghanistan increasingly moved towards a rentier state system based on patronage networks (Ibrahimi, 2019: 43). Following the Saur Revolution of 1978, which led to the overthrow of Daud Khan's republic, Afghanistan entered a prolonged period of severe political crisis, especially after 1980.

**Figure 3.** *The Evolution of the State in Afghanistan*

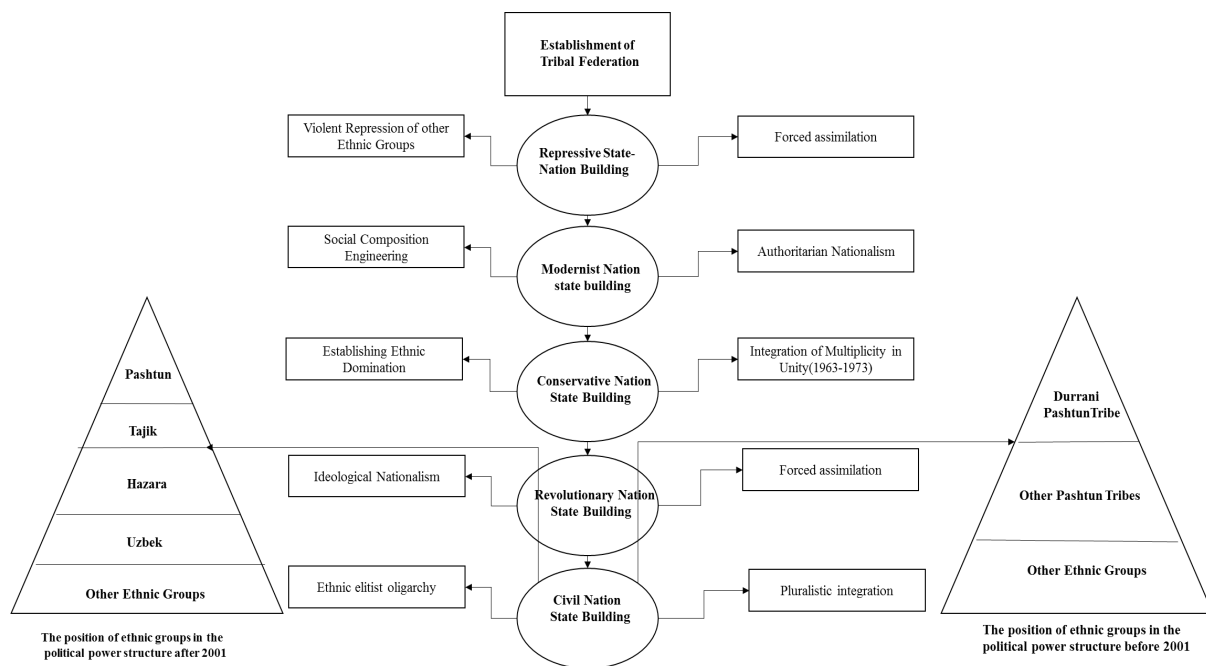


Source: (Geography and Political History, 2024)

As shown in the figure above, although Afghanistan's political system underwent changes, the rentier nature of the state persisted until 1978. After 1978, Afghanistan entered a period of severe political crises, and from the 1980s onward, the country was governed by fragile and failed states, characterized by a legitimacy crisis and inefficiency.

The focus now shifts to assessing the process of state- nation building in Afghanistan and its historical background. Since the 18th century, Afghanistan's efforts to establish a modern state-nation have faced numerous challenges and have not achieved satisfactory results. The process of state-nation building in Afghanistan has consistently been influenced by Pashtun nationalism, political centralization, and ethnic supremacy. After the establishment of the Afghan state in 1747 by Ahmad Shah Durrani, a political structure based on the unity of Pashtun tribes was formed, and the country's political identity was constructed around this ethnic group (Olesen, 1995: 21). This model of state-nation building was used as a tool to consolidate ethnic supremacy, hindering the formation of inclusive and participatory political institutions. As a result, rather than fostering national cohesion, it set Afghanistan on a path of social divergence and fragmentation.

**Figure 4.** The Background of the State- Nation Building in Afghanistan



Source: It was created by the author using various sources.

Amir Abdul Rahman Khan's rise to power marked an intensification of authoritarian centralization and repressive policies, solidifying state control through coercion (Wafizada, 2013: 95). His efforts to establish a strong and centralized state were characterized by the systematic suppression of non-Pashtun ethnic groups and deliberate demographic engineering. While this approach expanded state control, it also deepened social divisions and fueled resentment (Taheri, 2022: 78). In the early 20th century, Amir Habibullah Khan and Amanullah Khan introduced reforms aimed at modernizing the state; however, these efforts remained confined within the same centralized framework. Mahmoud Tarzi played a key role in strengthening Pashtun ethnic nationalism during the reigns of Habibullah and Amanullah, including the institutionalization of Pashto as the national language, which heightened ethnic and linguistic tensions (Lee, 2019, p. 438). Rather than fostering national unity through ethno-cultural inclusivity, Afghanistan's state-nation building process was driven by the imposition of a singular identity and authoritarian centralization. This approach not only entrenched ethnic dominance but also led to profound and lasting social divisions.

The brief rule of Habibullah Kalakani marked the first direct challenge to Pashtun dominance in Afghanistan's state structure. However, with the restoration of the Nader Khan dynasty, policies of ethnic centralization and supremacy were reinstated. Nader Shah and later Zahir Shah, despite introducing some reforms, continued efforts to consolidate Pashtun identity, structuring state institutions to uphold ethnic dominance (Shahrani, 2013: 30). In the 1970s, the fall of the monarchy and the rise of Muhammad Dawood Khan did not alter this trajectory. His rule reinforced Pashtun ethno-nationalism and authoritarian centralization (Rasanayagam, 2007: 60-61). Dawood Khan's advocacy for the creation of "Pashtunistan" extended ethnic supremacist policies beyond domestic affairs, creating regional tensions, particularly with Pakistan. His administration's repression of opposition forces further escalated instability, ultimately leading to his overthrow in a communist coup in 1978.

Although the communist regime sought to replace ethnic nationalism with Marxist ideology, power remained concentrated in Pashtun hands. The radical reforms imposed by the communists, implemented with little regard for Afghanistan's complex social fabric, provoked widespread resistance and internal uprisings (Giustozzi, 2000: 70-71). With the fall of the communist government in the 1990s and the rise of the mujahideen, Afghanistan fractured into competing power factions. While Pashtun dominance faced challenges during this period, no viable alternative national framework emerged, leaving the country in a state of political fragmentation. The civil wars among mujahideen factions devastated Kabul (Giustozzi, 2000: 47) and created the conditions for the Taliban's rise to power. The Taliban combined Pashtun ethno-nationalism with religious ideology, reinstating ethnic supremacist policies and systematically suppressing non-Pashtun groups (Taheri, 2022: 79). While these policies imposed a temporary order, they failed to achieve national legitimacy and ultimately collapsed with foreign intervention.

Since the establishment of modern Afghanistan in 1880, the state-building process has undergone profound transformations, evolving from Amir Abdul Rahman's highly centralized and authoritarian rule to the fragmented and war-torn governments of the mujahideen and the Taliban. Throughout its history, Afghanistan has faced persistent crises in state formation, characterized by ethnic rivalries, authoritarian centralization, and the absence of genuine public participation. These structural weaknesses have consistently undermined the political system, contributing to the fragility of the state and the repeated collapse of successive governments.

As a multi-ethnic society, Afghanistan has encountered deep-rooted challenges in its nation-state formation. Rather than fostering inclusive institutions, the process has been driven by the consolidation of power by a dominant ethnic group and the systematic suppression of others. This approach has continuously undermined national solidarity and perpetuated a crisis of legitimacy.

In summary, Afghanistan's failure to build a stable nation-state stems from its persistent reliance on authoritarian nationalism, forced identity and linguistic assimilation, an overly centralized power structure, mismanagement of ethnic and cultural diversity, suppression of political elites, weak state capacity, and ethnic supremacy. These factors have not only obstructed national cohesion but have also made any attempt at inclusive nation-state building extremely difficult.

#### **4. Findings: State- Nation Building in the Fragmented Society of Afghanistan (2001-2021)**

After three decades of war and crisis, the Bonn Agreement (2001) laid the foundation for a new phase of state-building in Afghanistan. This agreement was significant because, for the first time, with international support, various political groups and parties (excluding the Taliban) reached a consensus on establishing a democratic government with proportional ethnic, geographical, and religious representation, alongside the inclusion of women (Hosseini Khani, 2011: 217-218). The 2004 Constitution was drafted with the objectives of state-building, institutional stabilization, and fostering national unity (Chagnizadeh and Sahraei, 2015: 80). This framework exhibited elements of political pluralism and reflected a model of unity within diversity. It granted formal recognition to ethnic identities, local languages, and both the Hanafi and Ja'fari jurisprudential traditions while embracing liberal democracy, multiparty politics, open electoral competition, and an emphasis on diversity in public administration (Arvin, 2013).

However, Afghanistan's state-building efforts encountered profound challenges due to its multi-ethnic composition, linguistic and religious diversity, and deep-rooted ethnic divisions. During this period, two key leaders, Hamid Karzai (2001-2014) and Ashraf Ghani (2014-2021), adopted different approaches in their attempts to establish a stable national government.

#### **4.1 State-Nation Building During Hamid Karzai's Rule (2001-2014)**

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Afghanistan, under Hamid Karzai's leadership, entered a new phase of state-building and nation-building, centered on ethnic representation and inclusion, the establishment of democratic institutions, and international support. This period witnessed both significant achievements and major challenges in governance, leaving a lasting impact on the country's political and social structure. One of the most notable accomplishments of this era was the drafting and ratification of the 2004 Constitution (Manochehri and Mazari: 2008: 308), which emphasized the legal equality of all ethnic groups and laid the foundation for a republican state based on democracy. This constitution provided a framework for key institutions, including the presidency, parliament, an independent judiciary, and electoral commissions, fostering broader citizen participation in political decision-making. In this context, Afghanistan held presidential elections in 2004 and 2009, as well as parliamentary elections in 2005 and 2010, contributing to the establishment of democratic legitimacy (Faraji Rad et al, 2011: 117). Although these elections faced challenges such as allegations of fraud, they nonetheless represented a major milestone as Afghanistan's first democratic experience following decades of war and instability. Another significant development during this period was the increased participation of women in government. For the first time, women were represented in parliament, the judiciary, and executive bodies, with a quota established for their presence in the legislative assembly (Grenfell, 2004: 22). While largely symbolic in nature, this measure marked an important step toward strengthening women's rights and increasing their visibility in Afghanistan's political and social spheres.

In addition to political advancements, the Karzai government, with the support of the international community, made substantial investments in infrastructure, education, health, and telecommunications. The development of the road network, the expansion of schools, universities, and medical centers, and increased access to telecommunications and internet services brought tangible improvements to people's daily lives. The government also secured billions of dollars in foreign aid by garnering the support of Western countries and international organizations. Conferences such as those in Bonn, Tokyo, London, and Chicago played a key role in ensuring continued assistance, positioning Afghanistan at the center of global political attention (Ramyar, 2012: 121).

However, the state-building and nation-building processes during this period encountered significant challenges that ultimately hindered the formation of a sustainable national state. Excessive centralization, government inefficiency in delivering public services, a lack of genuine ethnic participation, and weaknesses in the rule of law were among the key obstacles to consolidating a modern state in Afghanistan. Additionally, the government's heavy reliance on foreign financial and military support transformed it into a rentier state dependent on international aid, rather than fostering the growth of indigenous and popular institutions. Widespread corruption, lack of transparency, and poor resource management further undermined the government's legitimacy, fueling widespread dissatisfaction among the Afghan people. The escalating insecurity, the resurgence of the Taliban, and the government's inability to fully control the country highlighted deep structural issues within the state-building process.

In conclusion, while the Hamid Karzai era (2001-2014) was marked by efforts to establish democratic institutions, develop infrastructure, and expand political participation, structural challenges including corruption, excessive centralization, ethnic elite dominance, and heavy dependence on foreign aid prevented the creation of a stable and inclusive government. The main obstacles and challenges of state-building and nation-building during this period can be summarized as follows:

- 1) **Poor Management of Ethnic Diversity: From National Unity to Ethnic Divergence:** A key goal of Hamid Karzai's government was to foster national cohesion and incorporate Afghanistan's ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity within a cohesive national framework (Yazdanpanah and Ahmadi, 2021: 321). The 2004 Constitution emphasized national unity, and the government sought to strengthen a shared national identity through language policies, state media, and the education system. However, in practice, these policies were largely symbolic. Rather than promoting national integration, they often exacerbated ethnic and identity-based rivalries, deepening ethnic divisions. As a result, instead of fostering national cohesion, the government struggled with increasing ethnic rivalries and political polarization. In this environment, the pursuit of sustainable national unity became increasingly elusive, and the government faced significant challenges in managing ethnic diversity and mitigating social fragmentation.
- 2) **Ethnic Oligarchy: From Political Participation to the Distribution of Power:** Initially, the composition of the Karzai government reflected Afghanistan's ethnic diversity, with representatives from various ethnic groups included in the government structure. However, this political participation was not based on a democratic and efficient system but rather on a coalition of power among ethnic elites (Sharan, 2016: 194). Instead of establishing sustainable democratic institutions where all ethnic groups could participate in decision-making through political and civil mechanisms, power became concentrated in the hands of a narrow circle of ethnic leaders and warlords. These leaders not only controlled economic and political resources but also tied the legitimacy of the state to their personal and group interests (Giustozzi, 2003: 15). Over time, rather than fostering genuine political inclusivity, this system evolved into a mechanism for distributing power and resources among ethnic elites. As a result, democratic institutions remained weak, and the state struggled to build national cohesion. The dominance of ethnic oligarchy prevented broader public participation in governance, eroded trust in state institutions, and contributed to long-term political instability.
- 3) **Centralization: Political Gridlock and the Gap Between the Center and the Periphery:** One of the most significant challenges to state-nation building during the Karzai era was the concentration of power within the political structure. Despite calls from various ethnic and political groups for decentralization, the Karzai government insisted on maintaining a highly centralized presidential system. Rather than strengthening national sovereignty and fostering social cohesion, this policy exacerbated the divide between the central government and the peripheral regions (Qadam Shah, 2021). The concentration of power in Kabul persisted despite the government's limited institutional capacity to govern effectively across the entire country. Many remote areas remained underserved, lacking government services, security, and economic development. This created a sense of alienation from the central government, leading to a decline in public trust. As a result, various ethnic groups and local communities sought non-state alternatives to address their needs. These alternatives included ethnic leaders, local networks, and even armed groups, which played a more prominent role in managing local affairs in the absence of an effective government presence. Ultimately, extreme centralization and the failure to create an inclusive,

participatory system led to political gridlock and deepened social divisions, preventing the government from establishing an accountable and sustainable governance structure.

- 4) Government Inefficiency: Institutional Failures and the Spread of Structural Corruption:** Government efficiency is a key indicator of success in the state-building process. However, during the Hamid Karzai era, the weakness of state institutions and the pervasive corruption within the government hindered the creation of an efficient and accountable system. Despite the influx of billions of dollars in international aid, these resources were often funneled through narrow circles of power and networks of corruption, rather than being used to strengthen state infrastructure or promote national development<sup>1</sup>. Corruption took root not only within executive and judicial institutions but also eroded the legitimacy of the state in the eyes of its citizens. In such an environment, many people viewed the state not as a national institution serving the public, but as a system for distributing privileges among political and economic elites. In other words, instead of building a modern, transparent, and efficient state, the government structure evolved into a network of informal, rent-seeking relationships that significantly influenced decision-making and governance to serve the interests of specific groups. As a result, the institutional reforms needed for state-building were never fully realized, and inefficient structures and systemic corruption became entrenched within the state during this period.
- 5) Weak Rule of Law: The Challenge of Establishing a Sustainable Legal Order:** Establishing an independent judiciary and enforcing the rule of law were among the core objectives of state-building during the Karzai era. However, these goals faced serious structural and implementation challenges. The influence of warlords and power brokers, weak law enforcement, and the absence of an effective oversight system prevented the fair and consistent administration of justice. Consequently, the judiciary was often manipulated to serve the interests of specific groups rather than functioning as an impartial institution. In many regions, traditional and informal courts replaced the formal judicial system because the public lacked trust in state courts. Many citizens turned to ethnic leaders and alternative networks, including the Taliban, to resolve disputes, further weakening the state's authority to provide justice. This erosion of judicial credibility not only undermined the legitimacy of the government but also deepened public distrust in legal institutions. Rather than establishing a transparent and independent judiciary, the state became entangled in political considerations, administrative corruption, and pressure from influential groups, which severely compromised the enforcement of the rule of law ( Yaqubi and Hussainy, 2025: 24). The inability to create a stable and credible legal order was a key factor in the failure of the state-building process and laid the groundwork for future crises.

As a result State-Nation building during Hamid Karzai's era was characterized by deep structural contradictions and institutional failures. On the one hand, the government emphasized ethnic participation and national unity, but in practice, participation was largely limited to an alliance of ethnic elites and warlords. On the other hand, power remained centralized, yet without the establishment of effective institutions capable of justifying this concentration of authority. The failure to manage ethnic diversity led to the dominance of an ethnic oligarchy within the state structure. Centralization further widened the gap between the center and the periphery, while corruption and institutional inefficiency

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<sup>1</sup> According to the SIGAR report, which reviewed the period from 2009 to 2019, approximately \$19 billion of U.S. aid allocated for the reconstruction of Afghanistan was wasted (SIGAR, 2020).

escalated. At the same time, the judiciary lost its independence and legitimacy, making the rule of law increasingly fragile. Collectively, these factors not only intensified ethnic fragmentation and social distrust but also paved the way for recurring political crises.

#### **4.2 State-Nation Building During Ashraf Ghani's Rule (2014-2021)**

In the discussion section, the conclusions of the current study are compared with the conclusions of similar studies in the literature while interpreting the possible reasons for the conclusions. Ashraf Ghani came to power with the promise of establishing a modern, technocratic, and non-ethnic-based government. His vision was to rebuild the decision-making system using scientific management principles and modern institutions. Ghani's key objectives included reducing the influence of warlords, combating corruption, and improving government efficiency. During his tenure, several financial and administrative reforms were introduced, including digitizing the tax system, reducing dependence on foreign aid, and increasing domestic revenue. Additionally, significant investments were made in infrastructure, particularly in transportation, energy, and regional trade projects such as TAPI (BBC, 2017) and CASA-1000 (Etilaatroz, 2020). At the same time, Ghani attempted to weaken the role of warlords in politics and professionalize the security forces by removing non-professional commanders.

However, in practice, these policies failed to create an inclusive and effective government. Instead, Ghani adopted an increasingly centralized approach, concentrating power within the presidency and making key decisions without broad consultation with political and social institutions. This led to widespread dissatisfaction among various ethnic groups, political factions, and even his own allies. The distribution of government positions was also highly selective, favoring a small circle of close advisors. As a result, many ethnic and political groups felt excluded and discriminated against, deepening ethnic divisions and social fragmentation.

Although the Ghani administration initially advocated for anti-corruption measures and administrative reforms, corruption both financial and administrative—remained entrenched within government structures. The failure to ensure justice and effectively combat corruption further eroded public trust in the state.

Security management was another major challenge. As Taliban attacks escalated and foreign troops withdrew, the government failed to effectively mobilize security forces. Strategic miscalculations in the war, growing public distrust, and poor coordination among security institutions contributed to the rapid Taliban takeover. Kabul fell in 2021 with little resistance, marking the collapse of the Afghan government. In the end, Ghani's tenure, which began with ambitious promises of reform, modernization, and anti-corruption efforts, resulted in an excessively centralized government, increased ethnic polarization, ineffective security management, and ultimately, the fall of the state. Instead of achieving meaningful reforms, his administration deepened Afghanistan's structural crises and set the stage for its eventual downfall. The key challenges of state-nation building during Ghani's administration can be summarized as follows:

- 1) **From Imposing Identity to Extreme Centralization:** Ashraf Ghani's policies aimed to establish a unified national identity and consolidate power within the central government. He sought to standardize national identity by officially designating "Afghan" as the identity of all citizens on electronic ID cards (Radio Azadi, 2018) while implementing administrative changes to reinforce this policy. At the same time, he pursued extreme centralization of power (Shahrani, 2018). Hamid Karzai engaged with ethnic leaders, whereas Ashraf Ghani limited decision-making to a small



group of technocrats within the Arg (Presidential Office). This inner circle made key decisions with minimal consultation with broader political and social movements, exacerbating dissatisfaction and alienation among various ethnic and political groups. Instead of fostering national unity, these policies deepened mistrust and social divisions, ultimately weakening the legitimacy of the state. The excessive concentration of power in the presidency, disregard for the concerns of ethnic and political factions, and unilateral decision-making moved the government away from an inclusive, national approach paving the way for future crises.

- 2) **From Ethnic Inclusion to the Restoration of a Mono-Ethnic State:** Despite his rhetoric about building an inclusive state, Ashraf Ghani increasingly pursued policies favoring ethnic exclusivity. He appointed individuals from his close circle to key positions in the government, security, and military while sidelining experienced commanders and officials from diverse ethnic backgrounds. These actions alienated various ethnic groups, diminishing the state's legitimacy among different tribes and political factions. His efforts to restore a predominantly Pashtun state became evident in his focus on consolidating power within his own ethnic group while gradually excluding others from key institutions. By systematically favoring Pashtuns for strategic government positions and marginalizing non-Pashtun commanders (Ayoobi, 2018), Ghani weakened the foundations of participatory governance. These policies fueled ethnic distrust and, over time, contributed to the collapse of his government.
- 3) **From the Promise of Structural Reforms to the Collapse of the Government:** Ashraf Ghani rose to power with promises of implementing structural reforms, creating an efficient and transparent government, and applying scientific management to governance. He emphasized that reducing corruption, modernizing the administration, and eliminating warlord influence would establish a modern, functional state. However, in practice, excessive centralization of power within a small elite, widespread corruption<sup>2</sup>, and poorly coordinated policies led to government inefficiency and growing public discontent (Shafiq, 2018). During Ghani's tenure, the presidency's dominance over state affairs and unilateral decision-making marginalized other political institutions and movements. The lack of meaningful participation from diverse ethnic and political groups led many to feel excluded, further exacerbating social divisions. These policies not only failed to foster national cohesion but also intensified ethnic tensions and public distrust. Meanwhile, mismanagement and corruption within state institutions further eroded confidence in the government. Despite receiving billions of dollars in international aid, a lack of transparency in fund allocation and the exploitation of resources by powerful elites fueled public frustration. Additionally, the government's failure to manage the security crisis—especially as the Taliban insurgency intensified—left it increasingly vulnerable. As dissatisfaction mounted and international support waned, Ghani's government became progressively isolated.

Finally, in August 2021, amid a swift Taliban offensive and the collapse of state institutions, Ghani fled the country without informing many of his top officials. This abrupt departure marked the sudden and dramatic fall of his regime. The experience of Ghani's government underscores that sustainable nation-building in multi-ethnic societies requires a balance between centralization and

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<sup>2</sup> According to Transparency International's annual report in 2018, Afghanistan ranked as the fourth most corrupt country in the world, following Somalia, South Sudan, and Syria. Furthermore, in 2021, the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) included Ashraf Ghani in its final list of the world's most corrupt individuals (Hasht Sobh, 2024).

participatory governance, recognition of identity plurality, and adherence to the rule of law. His failure to uphold these principles ultimately drove his government into crisis and led to its downfall.

A comparison of two decades of nation-state building in Afghanistan under the leadership of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani reveals distinct approaches to governance and nation-state building. Although the nation-state building process received international support following the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Karzai's (2001–2014) and Ghani's (2014–2021) administrations took divergent paths. Key factors such as the management of ethnic diversity, national participation, state-building strategies, government effectiveness, and the rule of law played crucial roles in shaping the outcomes of each administration.

**Table 1.** A Comparison of Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani's Leadership

<b>Indeks</b>	<b>Hamed Karzai(2001-2014)</b>	<b>Ashraf Ghani(2014-2021)</b>
<b>Type of Government</b>	Presidential	Presidential
<b>Nation-State Building Approach</b>	Restructuring, creation of state institutions	Institutional reforms and centralization
<b>Ethnic Policy</b>	Relatively egalitarian pluralism	Inegalitarian Pluralistic
<b>Participation of ethnic groups</b>	Relative participation of ethnic groups (Maintaining ethnic balance)	Gradual elimination of other ethnic groups (Pashtunism)
<b>Decision Making System</b>	Traditional Consensus	Centralism and exclusiveness
<b>Achievements</b>	Establishing the constitution, holding elections, democratic transfer of power	Institutional reform efforts, Efforts to become self-sufficient
<b>Failures</b>	Over-dependence on foreign aid, widespread corruption and the strengthening of the Taliban	The escalation of the war, the collapse of the army and finally the fall of the government

Source: It was created by the author using various sources.

As shown in the table above, the state-building period under Hamid Karzai is considered successful in reviving state institutions, passing a modern constitution, establishing a parliament, and founding the national army and police. However, heavy reliance on foreign aid and widespread corruption undermined the government's efficiency. In contrast, Ashraf Ghani sought to improve bureaucracy and reduce dependency on foreign aid<sup>3</sup>. However, due to corruption, weak management, and declining public trust, he failed to achieve these goals. The rapid collapse of Ghani's government in 2021 demonstrated the ineffectiveness of these efforts, as state institutions proved unable to survive without foreign support.

Regarding ethnic policy, Hamid Karzai attempted to maintain ethnic balance through engagement with ethnic leaders, although power remained primarily concentrated among the Pashtuns. In contrast, Ashraf Ghani pursued a policy of ethnic centralization and a more homogeneous ethnic approach, which fueled distrust and division. This led to widespread protests against his government, such as the "Light Movement" and the "Resurrection Movement."

In terms of public participation, Karzai's tenure witnessed two presidential and parliamentary elections, as well as the expansion of media and civil society. Although some degree of public participation in governance was achieved, election fraud diminished public trust. Under Ghani, electoral fraud became even more widespread, and his ethnocentric policies deepened political and social divisions, exacerbating public frustration.

Regarding decision-making, Karzai often consulted ethnic leaders and warlords, making decisions through political compromise. In contrast, Ghani adopted a highly centralized and unilateral decision-making approach, which contributed to the government's collapse due to its authoritarian tendencies. Ultimately, neither administration succeeded in creating an inclusive and sustainable state for all ethnic groups in Afghanistan, leading to the failure of the nation-state building project in the country.

## 5. Conclusions

For decades, the process of building a modern nation-state in Afghanistan has faced persistent obstacles, preventing the establishment of a stable and sustainable governance system. Despite various internal and external initiatives across different historical periods, Afghanistan continues to grapple with fundamental challenges in state-nation building. From the reign of Amir Abdur Rahman in the late nineteenth century to the Taliban regime, the state structure has been characterized by centralization, enforced homogenization, and ethnic dominance. Even the intermittent reforms introduced by Amanullah Khan and Zahir Shah failed to disrupt this pattern.

Following the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Afghanistan, with international support, embarked on the path of establishing a modern and democratic state. During Hamid Karzai's tenure, new state institutions were established, and a constitution was adopted. However, widespread corruption, centralized governance, and the mismanagement of ethnic diversity hindered the development of an inclusive and stable political system. Under Ashraf Ghani, efforts at administrative reform and reducing dependency

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<sup>3</sup> The report by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) indicates that the United States spent approximately \$145 billion on Afghanistan's reconstruction between 2002 and 2020. This substantial figure clearly reflects Afghanistan's deep dependency on foreign aid during the past two decades (SIGAR, 2020).

on foreign aid were undermined by ethnically driven policies and excessive centralization, further deepening social divisions and ultimately culminating in the collapse of the state in 2021.

The two-decade experience of state-building in Afghanistan demonstrates that stability in a multi-ethnic society requires embracing identity diversity, ensuring meaningful participation of all ethnic groups, and strengthening independent and efficient institutions. The failure to address ethnic tensions, combat corruption, and implement transparent governance led to the breakdown of the nation-building project and exacerbated the legitimacy crisis. This experience highlights that only through respect for ethnic diversity and broad-based participation can Afghanistan progress toward a democratic and sustainable state.

Looking ahead, several measures can contribute to the establishment of a stable and inclusive governance system. Revisiting the structure of governance and adopting a decentralized system that ensures ethnic representation can help reduce tensions and foster public trust. Strengthening state capacity by combating corruption and enhancing transparency is crucial for effective governance. Judicial and administrative reforms, independent oversight mechanisms, and a stronger civil society are essential for promoting accountability and institutional efficiency. Additionally, redefining national identity in an inclusive manner that fosters a sense of belonging among all ethnic groups is imperative. Identity policies should embrace cultural plurality rather than impose a singular national identity. Furthermore, promoting economic development and reducing reliance on foreign aid through job creation and infrastructure investment can enhance long-term stability and mitigate public dissatisfaction.

Ultimately, Afghanistan requires profound structural reforms, transparent governance, and an approach centered on justice and meaningful participation to transition toward an inclusive and stable nation-state. Only through these measures can the foundations for building a unified society rooted in shared identity and collective participation be established, ensuring the long-term success of the nation-state-building process in Afghanistan.

## **6. Declarations**

### **6.1. Competing Interests**

There is no conflict of interest in this study.

### **6.2. Authors' Contributions**

Authors declare that they have contributed equally to the work.

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