

A SOCIETY IN TRANSITION

Focus Group Discussions in Afghanistan

Prepared by the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI)

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NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) is a nonprofit organization working to strengthen and expand democracy worldwide. Calling on a global network of volunteer experts, NDI provides practical assistance to civic and political leaders advancing democratic values, practices and institutions. NDI works with democrats in every region of the world to build political and civic organizations, safeguard elections, and promote citizen participation, openness and accountability in government.

Democracy depends on legislatures that represent citizens and oversee the executive, independent judiciaries that safeguard the rule of law, political parties that are open and accountable, and elections in which voters freely choose their representatives in government. Acting as a catalyst for democratic development, NDI bolsters the institutions and processes that allow democracy to flourish.

Build Political and Civic Organizations: NDI helps build the stable, broad-based and well-organized institutions that form the foundation of a strong civic culture. Democracy depends on these mediating institutions—the voice of an informed citizenry, which link citizens to their government and to one another by providing avenues for participation in public policy.

Safeguard Elections: NDI promotes open and democratic elections. Political parties and governments have asked NDI to study electoral codes and to recommend improvements. The Institute also provides technical assistance for political parties and civic groups to conduct voter education campaigns and to organize election monitoring programs. NDI is a world leader in election monitoring, having organized international delegations to monitor elections in dozens of countries, helping to ensure that polling results reflect the will of the people.

Promote Openness and Accountability: NDI responds to requests from leaders of government, parliament, political parties and civic groups seeking advice on matters from legislative procedures to constituent service to the balance of civil-military relations in a democracy. NDI works to build legislatures and local governments that are professional, accountable, open and responsive to their citizens.

International cooperation is key to promoting democracy effectively and efficiently. It also conveys a deeper message to new and emerging democracies that while autocracies are inherently isolated and fearful of the outside world, democracies can count on international allies and an active support system. Headquartered in Washington D.C., with field offices in every region of the world, NDI complements the skills of its staff by enlisting volunteer experts from around the world, many of whom are veterans of democratic struggles in their own countries and share valuable perspectives on democratic development.

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Introduction

The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) first opened an office in Afghanistan in March 2002. Its program aimed at supporting political party development as the country struggled to build democratic institutions in the aftermath of the Taliban regime. As an early part of this work, funded by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the Institute conducted a first round of focus group research in Afghanistan. The findings of this research were published in May 2002 in a report titled "Afghan Perspectives on Democracy." With a wider geographic scope, this second round of focus group research uses the same research techniques, which are participatory in nature, to explore similar issues. This is part of an ongoing effort by NDI to reach out to Afghan citizens to understand their attitudes as the country moves through its political transition.

NDI's current program, supported by grants from the NED and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), continues to help improve the capacity of political parties to be inclusive and operate as viable political entities. The Institute's program also helps parties to prepare to participate in the Constitutional *Loya Jirga* and stand for and effectively compete in the 2004 elections. This program has been broadened to include a civil society domestic election monitoring component, in an effort to encourage transparency and ownership of the electoral process by the public.

To accomplish these objectives, NDI has held regular consultations, seminars and trainings for political and civic activists to help build and strengthen newly formed political parties and has provided technical assistance to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other civic groups to serve as domestic elections monitors for the 2004 national elections. In part, this focus group research was designed to inject the ideas and voices of Afghans into these activities and, more broadly, to make the views of Afghan men and women available to the political actors within Afghanistan, and to members of the international community, responsible for guiding the country through the current political transition.

NDI is committed to working with those parties that support pluralistic institutions in the context of Afghanistan's emerging democracy. NDI's political party and civil society partners are organizations that strive to unite the country, are ethnically and gender inclusive, reject the use of violence and weapons, and support the establishment of pluralistic institutions. The Institute pays particular attention to the inclusion of women in its activities, including this research. NDI also hopes to use the insights provided by these focus groups to inform the Institute's views on the political situation and support our ongoing efforts to foster greater communication among the government, the international community and these progressive, pluralistic groups.

NDI presents these findings from the focus groups not as a definitive measure of public opinion but as one reading of the political pulse of Afghan men and women at this particular time in the country's transition. Focus groups such as these are useful in understanding the language that people use when they discuss particular ideas or concepts. They are also useful in gaining a deeper appreciation for the motivations, feelings, and values behind participants' reactions. Focus groups are primarily concerned with understanding attitudes, rather than measuring them. This report identifies opinions and perceptions gathered during discussions among targeted groups. Participants were told that there are no right or wrong answers. NDI has attempted to faithfully record and transmit these views with the belief that the open expression of opinions of citizens is critical as Afghans begin the process of constructing their political institutions.

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December 2003

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Executive Summary

Two years after the fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan has passed a number of political milestones. As the most recent milestone is reached—the convening of the Constitutional *Loya Jirga* to review the new constitution—Afghans continue to believe that the country is moving forward and that political freedoms are increasing for all citizens. However, there is also a growing sense of unfulfilled promise and heightened concern that the expectations Afghans had following the fall of the Taliban, particularly disarmament, political and economic development and the establishment of rule of law, are not being met in a timely fashion and that further delay may lead to a return to the violence of the past.

According to focus group participants, security remained the overarching concern for advancing the country's democratic transition. It is seen as the key to successful political and economic development and a lack of security is viewed as the greatest obstacle to these aspirations. Most focus group participants linked security with the disarmament of private militias and expressed disappointment regarding what they viewed as the slow pace of this vital reform. Participants also drew a strong connection between disarmament and the possibility of conducting successful general elections in 2004.

Support for a democratic form of government remained strong among the focus group participants of all four of the country's principal ethnic communities. Afghans who participated in the research continue to believe that Islam and democracy are compatible and that those who find an inherent incompatibility between the two are either misinterpreting democracy or Islam. At the same time, participants stressed that Afghanistan requires a democracy suited to the country's own particular culture and values that is consistent with the Islamic faith, and noted that Afghan democracy must necessarily have differences from "Western" democracy.

While participants were keenly aware that popular political participation is essential to a well-functioning democracy, political parties were held in low esteem. Parties—particularly pre-existing parties—were seen as self-serving and corrupt and as the primary contributors to the violence of the past. Participants expected that party leaders would be accountable to their constituents and not merely work for the benefit of a select few. Those who recognize a potentially positive role for the parties stressed that a successful political party must be national in scope and multi-ethnic. Political parties based on a single ethnicity were seen as divisive and potentially quite dangerous to the fragile peace that currently exists and to the efforts toward political and economic reform currently underway.

Even among the less educated participants there was sense of the role of a constitution and its importance for securing and protecting fundamental rights. Many participants viewed the document as particularly vital for protecting minority rights and indicated that the protection of these rights is the key to future peace and stability. The majority stated that it is essential to include religion and religious protections in the constitution, but none of the participants in this research specifically mentioned Sharia law. At the time of this research the content of the draft constitution to be debated by the Constitutional *Loya Jirga* had not yet been made public. Afghans who participated in this research expressed the opinion that a viable constitution must include input from all interested Afghans and expressed disappointment with the constitutional consultation process in Afghanistan to date.

While the Bonn Agreement sets forth an election timetable that calls for general elections in June 2004, many were aware of very little in the way of election preparations. Most focus group participants did not initiate discussion regarding the elections and expressed far more interest in the Constitutional *Loya Jirga* than in the forthcoming polls. Those who did express an interest in the elections viewed the United Nations as the most neutral and appropriate administrator of the elections.

These are among the principal findings from 14 focus groups convened in Afghanistan from August to September 2003. Each group was stratified by gender, age, education and ethnicity in order to create homogenous groups conducive to frank discussion. Focus groups were conducted in Kabul as well as in the provincial towns of Bamiyan, Herat, Jalalabad, Mazar-i-Sharif and Kandahar. Due to the security situation, it was not possible to hold focus groups outside of these towns and, therefore, there is an urban bias in this research, which may in turn mean that focus group participants were more educated than the general rural Afghan population.

Other findings from this research include:

- Many participants viewed the Emergency *Loya Jirga* that established the transitional government as fundamentally flawed and not representative in nature; they also expressed optimism that the Constitutional *Loya Jirga* would be more representative.
- President Karzai was viewed very positively in most of the focus groups and is believed to be a capable leader.
- Participants expressed a general distrust of and dissatisfaction with the cabinet, and government ministries are perceived to be ineffective due to corruption and nepotism.
- Many focus group participants believed that the government is not meeting the economic expectations of individuals and there is increasing frustration over the inability to obtain basic necessities.

Background

Over the last two decades, Afghanistan has been home to war and civil unrest. From the Soviet occupation in the 1980s to the rise and fall of the Mujahidin and the emergence of the Taliban in the late 1990s, Afghan citizens have suffered under successive political systems. Not until the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001, did Afghans have the opportunity to begin rebuilding viable economic and political structures in the country, and begin the transition to a democratic Afghanistan.

The Bonn Agreement, signed on December 5, 2001, mandated that a fully representative government be elected openly and freely by mid-2004; although delayed, many of the provisions of the Bonn Agreement are now being met. The Constitutional *Loya Jirga* (CLJ) was elected nationwide and it currently is reviewing the draft constitution prepared by the Constitutional Commission. The constitution will establish the legal framework for Afghanistan's democratic development, particularly with respect to the 2004 national elections. The elections laws, which will detail the parameters of the elections, are expected to be released shortly after the conclusion of the CLJ. Further, a political party law was adopted in November, enabling political parties to register and begin preparing to contest the upcoming national elections. Finally, voter registration for the national elections began in December, enabling the estimated 10.5 million eligible voters to participate in the 2004 elections.

The Transitional Administration also has achieved some of the important objectives of the reconstruction process. For instance, the government has succeeded in introducing a new Afghan currency, a major stride toward stabilizing the economy and unifying the country. While the progress has been slow, President Karzai has successfully persuaded some regional warlords to hand over tax revenues to the central government, an essential step in asserting the power of the centralized administration. The President also recently reaffirmed his commitment to disarming regional militias and working to strengthen the Afghan National Army (ANA); there also appears to be interest by the international community in expanding the mandate of NATO forces outside of Kabul. Finally, many political parties have displayed resilience in the face of political and security challenges, and have demonstrated a deep interest and commitment to Afghanistan's democratic transition.

President Karzai's administration, however, faces serious challenges in advancing Afghanistan's democratic development. The deteriorating security environment remains the greatest obstacle to ensuring a stable democratic system. There is increasing concern, both within the Afghan government and the international community, whether credible elections can be held under the worsening security situation. The government thus far has been largely unable to challenge the control of regional commanders. Through force and violence, regional commanders and their militias have prevented the emergence of an open political system in which activists are free to carry out political activities. Without a significant national army, and with the limited mandate of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), President Karzai's administration has been unable to leverage state instruments to bring the regional commanders under the control of the central government.

The ability of the government to carry out elections that are relatively free of voter intimidation and violence, are representative of Afghanistan's multiethnic population, and that reflect the will of Afghan citizens will significantly advance the country's democratic transition. Although many challenges still exist, recent steps by the Afghan government to consolidate democratic institutions have created an environment conducive to fulfilling the mandate of the Bonn Agreement.

Afghanistan's Transition

Many Afghans believed that the country is moving forward and that citizens were experiencing increased political freedom; nevertheless, there was a growing sense of unfulfilled promise regarding disarmament and political and economic development

Some participants unambiguously see their country as moving in a positive direction. The specter of the Taliban has faded and there has been significant progress made since the fall of the regime.

Conditions are better than they were before. Our country has suffered from disaster and destruction for a long time. It is getting better and I'm really happy from my heart about it. (Pashtun male, 45 - 60 years, interviewed in Jalalabad)

People can walk wherever they want and to a degree the economy of the country has also improved. The reconstruction of schools, roads, and hospitals has taken place. So, in comparing the current situation to the past it is safe to say that the situation is getting better. (Hazara male shopkeeper, 18 - 29 years old, interviewed in Bamian)

I see conditions going in a positive way because work has begun on writing the constitution and the process for weapon collecting and disarmament has started. (Female civil servant, 18 -29 years old, interviewed in Kabul)

Participants focused primarily on the challenges facing Afghanistan in late 2003. Though the magnitude of these challenges was clear to all participants and positive responses were almost always immediately qualified, most remained optimistic regarding the country's future.

From the perspective of security and military matters, the situation is negative. There is not a day when we do not hear of a killing or explosion. However, from a political point of view there are positives. The party law is going to be adopted and other political activities as well. All of these are positive. (Tajik male, 18 to 29 years, interviewed in Herat)

The country is moving in a positive direction, but the main problem of our country is that Afghanistan consists of many ethnic groups. If we hope to have a better future, we must have national unity. (Uzbek male teacher, 30 to 40 years, interviewed in Mazar-i-Sharif)

Among some participants there was a sense of unfulfilled promise following the signing of the Bonn Agreement.

They promised after the Bonn Conference that there would be a national army established and weapons would be collected from combatants. They have attempted this but have not succeeded. Now, in the second year of government the promises of Bonn have not been fulfilled. We are still optimistic but we are disappointed. (Pashtun woman, 45 to 60 years, interviewed in Kandahar)

The Afghans that took part in this research viewed security as both the key to success and the greatest obstacle to progress in the country. Each focus group discussion returned to this topic even in the course of discussing other issues.

When the transitional government was formed they promised to collect weapons. Unless the weapons are collected we won't have security and freedom. The constitution remains incomplete but before creating the constitution it is better to disarm those who have weapons. (Pashtun woman, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Jalalabad)

I think the best thing must be peace and security. It is right that security is better than before, but weapons have not been gathered and in many provinces, we hear in the newscast that there are many problems. (Uzbek male, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Mazar-i-Sharif)

The situation is bad all over the provinces; especially in Kandahar province as those with guns have authority. The situation is as bad as it was before. Even though schools for women have started and are continuing to teach, warnings have been given to the teachers and they are threatened. If the government does not start the disarmament process Afghanistan will suffer. (Pashtun woman, 45 to 60 years, interviewed in Kandahar)

Focus group participants expressed concerns that the slow development and deployment of key institutions such as the police and military contributes to ongoing insecurity.

Unless the national army and the police are formed, nothing will be done. We see that the national troop formation is not going well. All the professional people were removed and instead unprofessional people took their positions. If this condition continues, no security and no peace will come in our country. (Pashtun female, 18 to 29 years, interviewed in Jalalabad)

In Afghanistan generally the situation is not good. We don't have a government. We are an Islamic country, but there is no law. We don't have police or a national army and there is no one to bring security and law. We have many problems. We want the new constitution to be made according to the people's wishes and needs. We want the police and the national army to be re-established and all people to participate in it. We want to end this foreign intervention. (Pashtun male, 18 to 29 years, interviewed in Kandahar)

The lack of significant progress on nationwide disarmament and the persistence of violent conflict in some parts of the country were ever-present concerns and fears in every focus group, cutting across ethnicity, gender and geographic location.

The security situation is not good - we are informed through the media that in the southern provinces battles are still going on. (Tajik female government employee, 18 to 35 years, interviewed in Kabul)

The conditions are almost as she said, but there is no security over the country. As we hear in Joz Jan, Mazar, Fariab, and Khost the parties there are fighting each other. Conditions are not entirely good. (Uzbek female government employee 18 to 35 years old, interviewed in Kabul)

Even in Kabul, where security is significantly better than in the provinces, city residents worry about both personal safety and national security. First hand experience with rising crime, community "rumor mills", and greater access to information about other parts of the country have contributed to feelings of insecurity among the focus group participants.

Security in Afghanistan is not being maintained. The Ministry of Internal Affairs and the police are not paying attention to it. Children are stolen and disappear from Kabul and their intestines, eyes and kidneys are taken out. Robbers in Kabul break into apartments and steal household appliances. (Female homemaker, 30 to 44 years old, interviewed in Kabul)

The central government lacks control over all parts of the country. Some parts of the country are still dominated and controlled by local commanders. Fighting continues in some places of the country. We hear of clashes between the parties and commanders in Mazar-i-Sharif, Khost, and Paktia provinces that have led to casualties among the

innocent civilians. (Pashtun female government employee, 18 to 35 years old, interviewed in Kabul)

In those areas where fighting continues, commanders and their gunmen remain strong and the government security forces weak. In these areas it is unsurprising to find a sense that the country is in trouble. This concern and apprehension is not limited to areas currently experiencing violent conflict, but can also be found in relatively stable areas.

When we see displeasing things in our country we get unhappy. Some days ago, we had a wedding. Some armed people came and said they would provide security if we paid them 20,000 Afghani (USD\$467). We said: "How can we pay you when we don't have that amount of money?" They then shot at us. Two men were killed and some others were injured. (Pashtun male, 45 to 60 years, interviewed in Jalalabad)

The discrepancy between security and insecurity divides the capital from the provinces and the cities from the countryside.

The security you have in Kabul, we don't have in Kandahar. We want security in the provinces because the children should be able to go to school and continue their lessons so they may have a bright future. (Pashtun female, 45 to 60 years, interviewed in Kandahar)

The situation of Afghanistan especially during the last three or four months is bad. In Kandahar every night the houses are broken into. People can't go out at night because the situation is very dangerous. I was told soldiers of the security commander arrested a thief seven times, but he was often free. We are not sure who took money and let him go for 2,000 - 3,000 Afghani (USD\$46 - 70). (Pashtun male, 18 to 29 years, interviewed in Kandahar)

Participants in this research appeared frustrated with what they viewed as a lack of progress in areas essential to continued political development, such as security, disarmament and establishing the rule of law.

Our problem is that those with guns are governing, especially from the outskirts of the cities. These irresponsible armed forces bother people a lot by collecting taxes, obligatory charity and other things. I believe that disarmament of these forces is necessary. They must be taken away from cities and put into military divisions. (Uzbek male teacher, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Mazar-i-Sharif)

Focus group participants also link physical security with political development.

In my opinion two things are important: one is the maintenance of security and the second is political stability. If we don't have security we won't have political stability and if we don't have political stability we won't have security. So these two things are very important. (Tajik male, 18 to 29 years, interviewed in Herat)

One thing that causes a little disappointment among the people is the lack of the rule of law. The laws and regulations are not applied or put into practice. (Tajik male government employee, 18 to 29 years, interviewed in Kabul)

As Afghanistan's economy improves, those operating small businesses have also begun to feel the benefits.

My family situation has gotten a bit better. I can find the money that can meet the requirements of my family. (Hazara male shopkeeper, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Bamiyan)

Focus group participants also expressed the view that inequality is growing, particularly in Kabul, where the wealth of the elite is quite visible, but also in rural areas where the lack of basic amenities creates severe hardship for the poor.

Life is fair, neither good nor bad. We see some people living in modern apartments and driving modern cars as we wait for buses which we sometimes can't afford. But we accept this situation. Our country and our economy are not good when compared to other countries. (Female homemaker, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Kabul)

The rich people drive cars, but the poor people are riding bicycles or walking. (Male, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Kabul)

My biggest disappointment is that I don't have my own house and I have to rent. (Female homemaker, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Kabul)

There is a lack of places to live for those with little income. We can't buy or even rent a house and owners avoid renting me their houses because I have four children. (Uzbek female homemaker, 18 to 29 years, interviewed in Mazar-i-Sharif)

Women and girls, those most discriminated against under the Taliban regime, seem to provide the best gauge for measuring improvements.

Girls can go to school and we will be free from being illiterate. This illiteracy causes problems and war. (Tajik female homemaker, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Herat)

The situation is getting better. Under the cruel rule of Taliban women couldn't get out of their houses and now they can work. (Uzbek female homemaker, 18 to 29 years old, interviewed in Mazar-i-Sharif)

The best thing is the opening of courses for women and girls. They can learn how to use computers, English, sewing, tailoring and embroidery as well as flower design. Now girls and women can go proudly to these courses. Not only are they better educated but also they learn a craft. It is a source of pride for us. (Pashtun female teacher, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Jalalabad)

Women in particular have cause for optimism due in large part to their return to work and the increasing educational opportunities now available to them. However, outside of the capital, progress in this area is more limited and women in some provincial areas continue to be denied basic freedoms, including freedom of speech and the right to be free from violence.

Education is a woman's right and today we have our rights. Women can go outside, work and live freer than before. Now a woman knows that she is human and can live like a human being. Before women were thought to be like a home appliance but now we have our rights. (Female homemaker, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Kabul)

There are still armed men in our cities and people cannot go to their work feeling fully secure. Most women come to work wearing their burka. They cannot yet bare their faces in public. (Pashtun woman, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Jalalabad)

This state hasn't been disarmed yet and when women go out of their homes, some men look angrily towards these women. One big problem women have is freedom of speech. Two weeks ago we recorded a radio program, but we have not yet been given permission to broadcast it. [Pashtun woman, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Jalalabad]

Effects of the Transition on Individuals

Security, which most link to disarmament, was the overarching concern of many Afghan focus group participants, but on a daily basis most simply are concerned with obtaining basic necessities

Asking citizens about the future of their country can often produce abstract responses, while asking about themselves and their families often produces direct and personal views. Understanding the situation of Afghan families and how this is linked to future political priorities is important for those seeking elected office.

While participants identify unemployment as a nationwide problem, even those with government jobs are frustrated. Government employees and relatives of government employees report that salaries are low and not commensurate with the cost of living. In addition, participants reported that salaries are not paid regularly.

Unemployment is very high in our country; there is no work. The lack of a strong economy is a problem for families and people around the country. The government must create jobs. If the people have jobs and a good economy there won't be fighting. (Uzbek male, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Herat)

Even those with the privilege and prestige of government jobs are struggling.

I am a government employee and I earn 1500 Afghani (USD\$35) as a salary and I have five children. How is this enough money for my family? Similarly other employees have the same problems. (Tajik male civil servant, 18 to 30, interviewed in Herat)

Teachers do not have good economic prospects. How can we pay the rent with my 1300 Afghani (\$30) salary? Teachers' salaries are not enough. With such a low salary how can I pay the rent of a house for a year (here people must pay the rent annually)? We heard that teachers' salaries were raised, but we have not seen it yet. They must fulfill this promise. (Pashtun female schoolteacher, 18 to 30 years)

For those in difficult straits, there are few options for financial support or assistance.

My economic situation is very poor: my husband is unemployed and my salary is only 1600 or 1700 Afghanis (USD\$37 - 39) per month. I can't make it cover everything. Should I pay the house rent or bus fare or spend it on other problems? They do not pay our salary on time. People borrow money but who can led us money? (Female government employee, 18 to 29 years, interviewed in Kabul)

Those with a job, small business or other sources of income are susceptible to predatory practices and harassment.

My husband is a vendor and he has a pushcart on which he sells fruit. He is always bothered by police officers as he works on the streets. (Uzbek woman, 18 to 29 years, interviewed in Mazar-i-Sharif)

A number of refugees, encouraged by the relative peace created by the Transitional Authority, have already returned to Afghanistan and focus group participants by and large regarded this as a positive event. However, large refugee and expatriate communities remain outside the country and focus group participants indicated that they believe many expatriates are closely monitoring political developments before deciding whether to return. Financial support from family members abroad is an important contribution to the resources of many Afghan families and to the Afghan

economy, participants indicated that in the absence of a stable political situation capable of maintaining a secure economy, many expatriates will not, and perhaps should not, return.

The best thing that has happened in Afghanistan is the return of people to the country. Our extended family has just recently arrived. (Tajik male, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Herat)

Focus group participants indicated the continued separation of families due to violence and political instability is difficult.

Our relatives, brothers and sisters abroad say that there is a security problem in Afghanistan and they will not come until security improves. I pray the security situation will improve so our relatives can return home. (Tajik woman, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Herat)

My son doesn't have any children and he lives abroad. I am so worried about him. I hope Afghanistan becomes peaceful so that our children can come back to their homes and live with us. (Tajik woman, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Herat)

Despite the emotional difficulties of family separation, financial support from overseas relatives is viewed as an essential benefit.

If my family members were abroad, we would be lucky because they would send us dollars and we wouldn't have any concerns. (Pashtun woman, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Jalalabad)

Many focus group participants indicated that the continued absence of the nation's best-trained professionals has negatively affected the quality of governance.

We want to see those who are educated and have studied at universities, who previously were functionaries, to come back from foreign countries. We need them to come back and work with the government. (Pashtun woman, 45 to 60 years, interviewed in Kandahar)

Some focus group participants indicated that the Transitional Government has failed to provide basic services on a consistent basis.

While the children enthusiastically run to school, they find nothing there. There are no facilities, books or stationery. (Uzbek male, 40 to 60 years, interviewed in Mazar-i-Sharif)

There is no salary for government employees, no coupons and no electricity. Rich people and commanders have electricity, but for the poor there is no electricity. (Tajik female student, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kabul)

Our main problem is a shortage of electricity. (Hazara male shopkeeper, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Bamiyan)

Democracy

Democracy was viewed positively and was seen as requiring popular political participation

While there is no single correct definition of democracy, internationally accepted democratic norms generally include free and fair elections, popular political participation and freedom of speech and assembly, among others. The focus group participants in this study indicated their acceptance of and belief in many of these basic tenets and the importance of the creation and

protection of these democratic norms in the emerging Afghan political system. Focus group participants particularly stressed the need for popular participation in a democratic government.

Democracy is defined as government chosen by the people for the people. (Uzbek male, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Mazar-i-Sharif)

When we say democracy we mean the people's government. (Uzbek male teacher, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Mazar-i-Sharif)

Democracy is guaranteed when government listens to people's ideas and beliefs. (Hazara female, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Bamiyan)

Democracy is a government that has been formed based on the will of the people through general elections with all the ethnic groups and tribes in the country taking part. There is freedom of the press, freedom of belief and freedom of expression. (Tajik male civil servant, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kabul)

Participants also closely associated freedom and equality with democratic government.

When we say democracy we think that people are freer. It means people can express their ideas about the law, the constitution and other issues. If there is no democracy, then the people's ideas can't be expressed. (Tajik woman, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Herat)

In democracy an individual has equal rights with other members of the society and his or her rights are guaranteed and he or she can defend their rights. (Hazara woman, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Bamiyan)

Democracy is equality of all ethnic groups and freedom without threats. (Uzbek male, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Mazar-i-Sharif)

Focus group participants expressed the view that democracy is desirable and important to progress.

Unless there is democracy in a country I do not think it will develop. (Pashtun woman, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Jalalabad)

All other countries are based on democracy and progress. (Tajik woman, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Herat)

Democracy is the choice of all the people in the world, especially Afghans. I think government of the people and by the people is a very good government. We don't want the government of the warlords and government by force. We just we want a free and democratic government. (Pashtun woman, 45 to 60 years, interviewed in Kandahar)

While participants did have the tendency to equate democracy with freedom, participants also recognized that freedom cannot be limitless and that democracy in Afghanistan must take into consideration existing cultural and social norms and values.

Democracy should be applied in our country according to the context of Afghanistan. It should be not so free and not so strict. (Tajik male, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Herat)

Democracy should be guided by principles and rules. There should not be a democracy in which every one can do whatever they want. (Tajik student, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kabul)

Democracy does not mean unlimited freedom. We want schools and universities for girls; schools in suburbs; work for suburban women; and safety and security. We want freedom of speech. These are positive elements of democracy from which people will benefit. Democracy is not something wrong. There is a little difference between democracy and freedom. (Pashtun female schoolteacher, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Jalalabad)

Participants in this research indicated that democracy is often misunderstood in Afghanistan and as a result some Afghans incorrectly associate the freedom that comes with democracy with immoral behavior.

Unfortunately, some people think democracy is in fact a negative phenomenon that can take a community towards corruption, prostitution or ill fame; however, democracy is not what they think it is. (Hazara shopkeeper, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Bamiyan)

We say that democracy should be according to our culture. When a person has democracy, we should not mix up democracy with immorality. If democracy exists, women will have progressive lives. (Pashtun woman, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Jalalabad)

Most focus group participants indicated that democracy does not yet exist in Afghanistan.

Where is democracy? Here is rule of the gun by militia. Democracy means liberty, but here there is rule of the gun and everyone does everything they like. (Pashtun male, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kandahar)

Islam and Democracy

Islam and democracy were viewed as compatible

None of the participants indicated that Islam and democracy are incompatible. Participants did concede that there are some in Afghanistan that do believe democracy and Islam are incompatible, but participants viewed this to be due to a great deal of misunderstanding regarding the nature of democracy in the country. Most participants were emphatic regarding the positive links between Islam and democracy and cited both the Prophet Muhammad and the Al Quran to support that position.

If people correctly interpret Islam, they will see that Islam itself is democratic. (Tajik woman, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Herat)

Islam is a really democratic religion as there are no privileges in Islam. All people respect one another. (Tajik male, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Herat)

While not defined in detail, there is strong support for “Islamic democracy” in Afghanistan. Focus group participants described a political system that is based on democratic norms and that takes into account the religious and moral values of Islam as well as other aspects of Afghan culture.

Islam is a complete religion and Afghanistan's people are Muslims and they want Islamic democracy. They do not want to act out of step with the Prophet Mohammed who gave all the Islamic people democratic rights, such as to study. The Taliban prevented girls and women from having an education, contrary to the Prophet whom said that education was a duty of both the Muslim men and women. (Pashtun female teacher, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Jalalabad)

Some focus group participants did not directly relate the origins of democracy and Islam, but did not see the two as in conflict.

I think if we have real Islam, we do have democracy. The main problem in the world today is with Muslims, not with the Islamic religion. (Uzbek male doctor, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Mazar-i-Sharif)

Democracy is an attitude. Religion relates man to God but democracy is a pattern of activity and work that relates government to citizens and citizens to government. (Tajik male, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Herat)

Democracy, or government of the people, existed in the lifetime of the Prophet Mohammad. His four successors were assigned and appointed through an election. My view is that an Islamic democratic government can be established. (Pashtun male government employee, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kabul)

Focus group participants viewed a lack of education as the primary reason that some Afghans do not see the mutually supportive roles of democracy and Islam.

Those people who are illiterate they don't know democracy. Most of our elders do not know what democracy means and what are its advantages. Some interpret that democracy is bad thing. (Tajik male, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Herat)

Islam establishes democracy and the protection of human rights, so there can be both democracy and Islam in a country. But our people are not educated and do not know what democracy means. They think that democracy is a bad thing, but it is a very good word. (Pashtun male, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kandahar)

Before discussing democracy, people must know what democracy means because most of our people are not enlightened. They misunderstand democracy. They think it means the removal of the burka or veil from women's heads. These are people who do not let women go to school. They are the ones who kill girls, sell them or marry them by force. For this reason they must be aware of democracy so that they should not misunderstand it. (Pashtun woman schoolteacher, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Jalalabad)

Participants also blamed incorrect theological interpretations by the Taliban for current misunderstandings regarding democracy. This view was particularly strong among women and members of the Hazara ethnic group (which is predominantly Shia).

Our Prophet was a democrat. In his time, women were buried alive in the ground. He set the women free from this and ensured their rights. But the Taliban, who called themselves Muslims, put women in houses and locked them there. We cannot call them Muslims. Islam ensures the rights of women to work and have an education. (Uzbek woman, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Mazar-i-Sharif)

As we are taught, there is no contradiction between Islam and democracy. The Holy Quran says that mankind is free and the freedom allowed by the Quran is certainly allowed by democracy too. Of course, this is not the Islam that was presented by the Taliban. If the Mullahs taught the real Islam to the people, no one would protest against democracy. (Hazara male shopkeeper, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Bamian)

We want democracy according to the roles of Islam. Learning and knowledge are obligatory of both men and women and must not be prohibited, especially in our villages. (Pashtun woman, 45 to 60 years, interviewed in Kandahar)

Participants asserted that Afghans want an "Islamic democracy" based on Afghan culture and values and this is often explained in negative terms as a rejection of "western democracy."

Our country is an Islamic country; therefore we want democracy according to the roles of Islam. We follow what the prophet Mohammad did, but we don't want western democracy. (Pashtun male, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kandahar)

Democracy is different in each community. Democracy in America and Afghanistan will be different. If democracy is interpreted according to people and an area's customs it is better. (Tajik male, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Herat)

Misperceptions regarding existing "Islamic democracies" or democracies with large Muslim populations were evident. Neighboring Pakistan and Iran were most frequently cited; also cited were the gulf state monarchies United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Egypt. More distant countries with established democratic traditions such as Bangladesh, Turkey, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines were mentioned regularly. Some saw Afghanistan as already a member of the ranks of Islamic democracies.

The fact that democracy has been globalized means everyone wants this system. However, many Islamic countries that claim to be democratic countries are not totally honest. I do think that Afghanistan is the first country that has established a better democratic government. (Hazara shopkeeper, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Bamiyan)

In the context of considering "Islamic democracies", focus group participants did not draw a strong link between democracy and elected government. Rather, democracy was equated with economic development and equal rights for women.

Islamic democracies include Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia and many more where women can work beside men. (Uzbek woman, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Mazar-i-Sharif)

Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates are making progress through democracy. (Uzbek male student, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kabul)

Islamic democracies are Iran and Pakistan. Pakistan has the best democracy and the best form of Islam. People are apparently free to work and pray. Men, woman and children can go to school. Everything is available to them. (Female homemaker, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Kabul)

Participants often made an effort to rank or give a qualitative measure of the countries they mentioned, with Malaysia most often cited as the best example of an Islamic democracy.

Indonesia and Malaysia have an electoral system and people elect the president. There is no military government and democracy is seen there. (Uzbek male teacher, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Mazar-i-Sharif)

Malaysia is the best country and it has the best democracy. (Tajik male, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Herat)

We cannot say that these countries have 100 percent democracy, but they have a little or some democracy. I can say that Malaysia has good democracy, but in Pakistan democracy is not complete. Iran is formally an Islamic country and Turkey has some democracy. Saudi Arabia is a good example of an Islamic country; it has good democracy (as does) Somalia and Bangladesh. (Pashtun woman, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Jalalabad)

Those Islamic countries where democracy was seen to be limited were also singled out.

We see the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has a good government, but it has some limitations about which people are dissatisfied. (Uzbek female civil servant, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kabul)

Political Parties

Parties in general were viewed very negatively, though there was some hope for national, multi-ethnic parties

Afghans interviewed as part of this focus group research had negative views of political parties. Focus group participants associate the parties with the 30 years of war that ravaged the country and do not view either the pre-existing or the newly formed parties as credible institutions capable of effectively governing the country.

We think the political parties in the past have only thought about their own benefits and have been the root of all violence and disaster in our county. Therefore, they should not be allowed to participate in government because they will damage government for their own purpose. (Hazara woman, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Bamiyan)

I just want government without political parties because during the last 24 to 25 years we haven't seen any benefit from them. They were a distraction and destroyed every part of our country, so they must not exist. (Pashtun woman, 45 to 60 years, interviewed in Kandahar)

Participants also saw political parties as self-serving, working in the interests of the party or of individuals within the party and not in the public interest. Some even considered that the parties may be working in the interest of foreign governments.

Often we hear from the radios that all of the old parties are busy struggling against each other. They do not have a sense of service. All of them are trying to obtain power. (Pashtun male, 45 to 65 years, interviewed in Jalalabad)

Political parties are necessary if they work for society. If they work in the favor of their own personal interests, then the people won't approve of them. (Hazara male student, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kabul)

I am not member of any party and I think political parties are not made in this country. They were made outside and gained support from foreign countries. They are imposed on the people and I think they are illegal. (Uzbek shopkeeper, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Mazar-i-Sharif)

Some focus group participants, however, did recognize a possible role for political parties in a new democratic system and allowed for the possibility that the existing parties could become effective democratic institutions.

For almost 30 years, our country was at war and everything was destroyed. People became poor refugees and vagrants. The cause was the selfishness of these parties, but now they should learn from the past and step back from their selfishness and pride. It is enough for every party to impose only their ideas and goals. A party must not keep itself in government by force. Let the people take part in elections and vote for the next government. (Female, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kabul)

We can't say that a country that doesn't have political parties is a democracy. (Pashtun female, 45 to 60 years, interviewed in Kandahar)

Parties must work within the framework of the rules and regulations for political parties. They must be non-military and unarmed. (Uzbek male, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Mazar-i-Sharif)

Of course there should be parties. They should have the right to organize and in a democracy there should not be a limited number of parties. They should permit all parties to perform activities. If the Afghan people support them, they will vote for them. (Tajik male, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Herat)

Some focus group participants expect the government to regulate political parties.

The political party law has not yet been put in place in Afghanistan. Political parties are not allowed to work. The parties should only carry out their political activities after the law has been enacted. (Tajik government employee, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kabul)

Participants from each region expressed a strong interest in the creation of national, multi-ethnic parties. Ethnically based parties were seen as divisive and believed to have a negative impact on political development.

Political parties should gain the support and votes of the people. These parties should have a constitution according to which they must work. They should bring national unity, they should avoid prejudice and they should accept the other parties' views. They should try to bring peace and security to the country and establish good relationships with neighboring countries. They should be open to every tribe, region, ethnicity and religion. (Hazara bookseller, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Bamiyan)

Every party that emerges in Afghanistan should pay attention to national unity. They should not be partial to one ethnicity. They shouldn't discriminate against anyone. (Tajik male, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Herat)

Parties should have national characteristics. They should take the national interest into consideration. They should take people's customs and cultures into consideration. They should be united, Moslem and religious. They must not discriminate against ethnic and religious groups. (Tajik male, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Herat)

They should play a positive role for their country's people without any discrimination. We all live in one country, one religion and one region. Parties should serve with honesty and not single out people saying you are Pashtu, you are Tajik or Hazara. If they do this, there will be racism and they won't be able to form a government. (Female homemaker, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Kabul)

Focus group participants also expected the political parties to be well-organized and capable of formulating and communicating a political vision for the country.

Political parties must have their own special strategy, a reasonable plan, and act according to it. Their aim must be the improvement and progress of the country, our society and our people. They should conform to their slogans and must think and reflect on the progress and development of the country. (Uzbek government employee, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kabul)

Participants in this research were aware that many political parties exist in Afghanistan, but most could only name a handful of the parties. Party recognition is generally based on the leader of the party; participants in the majority of cases could name the leader of a specific party, but could not give the formal name of the party.

The previous parties as Khalq, the Taliban's party, and Afghan Millat are not accepted as parties today, as they moved towards fascism. As we know more that 200 political parties have registered, namely Jamiat, Wahdat, Mahaz, Junbesh and others. (Uzbek male, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Mazar-i-Sharif)

There are many political parties like that of Rabani, Sayaf, Mujadidi, Gulbuddin and many more whose names we don't know. (Uzbek woman, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Mazar-i-Sharif)

The Loya Jirgas

The Emergency Loya Jirga was generally seen as flawed, but continued optimism for the Constitutional Loya Jirga was prevalent

The Emergency Loya Jirga (ELJ) in June 2002 was the first time in almost two decades that Afghans were able to participate in an election process and in some form of representative government. Given its vital role as the mechanism that established the Transitional Administration and its forthcoming role to approve the constitution, it is important to understand how Afghans perceived the process of establishing and holding the *loya jirgas*.

Some focus group participants expressed positive views regarding the Emergency Loya Jirga.

The peace today we have in the country is its result of the Emergency Loya Jirga. (Hazara woman, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Bamiyan)

After several years of civil war, despotism and tyranny, the ground was paved for different classes of people to get together in one place to vote for the candidate of their choice. (Uzbek civil servant, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kabul)

Our representatives did deliver our ideas and wishes to the Loya Jirga as the transitional government was formed. (Tajik woman, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Herat)

The Loya Jirga had a good result. They formed a government and knowledgeable people were selected to manage the country. The opportunity was given to women for the first time to express their opinions. Some of our women were selected, such as the Minister of Public Health. (Female homemaker, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Kabul)

One of its positive results is that security is partially restored as compared to last years' pillaging, plundering, killing and destruction. (Pashtun male civil servant, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kabul)

Other participants qualified positive responses and less enthusiastically endorsed the body and its work.

It was good in that our compatriots who live abroad sent their representatives to the Jirga. Of course, it had some shortcomings and we hope to have better ones in the future. The warlords had a strong influence and we observed that such people were elected as representatives. We think the same mistake will be made in the coming Loya Jirga, but we do not want this to be repeated and representatives must not be imposed. (Uzbek male shopkeeper, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Mazar-i-Sharif)

However, the majority of participants in the focus groups saw the Emergency Loya Jirga as undertaking a fundamentally flawed process and as an institution that reinforced the dominance of warlords and commanders at the expense of the views of Afghan citizens. In fact, these participants questioned whether the ELJ was either democratic or representative.

People whose hands are stained with blood should not be elected. (Pashtun woman, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Jalalabad)

Before last year's Loya Jirga, we were taught that democracy means freedom, but during the Loya Jirga no one could vote freely and votes were bought by those with guns. (Pashtun woman, 45 to 60 years, interviewed in Kandahar)

The Loya Jirga last year was not so satisfactory or constructive. The promises that were made to the nation by the delegates were not fulfilled and did not materialize at all. (Pashtun male civil servant, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kabul)

It was done by force under the commanders' authority who themselves chose Hamid Karzai as president. In the local elections they distributed money and used force. The people who were armed and distributed money were selected. It wasn't right; they weren't the peoples' real representatives. (Tajik male, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Herat)

Ethnic groups that view themselves as a "minority" did not view the Emergency Loya Jirga positively.

It was not totally democratic: not all ethnicities could participate and the majority of the representatives were either forced or hired by influential groups. The rights of the Hazara ethnic group and all Shiites were not guaranteed in the Loya Jirga. Representatives could not express their personal ideas freely and the majority of people think that Loya Jirga was an incomplete one. (Hazara male shopkeeper, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Bamiyan)

Personally, I think it is all an historic game that has always violated the rights of minorities. I refuse to accept representatives who were appointed. This is beneficial for Pashtuns, not for the Uzbeks, Tajik's or Hazaras. (Uzbek male, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Mazar-i-Sharif)

Focus group participants noted that the use of force and the possession of weapons remains a corrupting influence on any political process in Afghanistan.

It was a good Loya Jirga, but a Loya Jirga must be held when the commanders have been disarmed and their weapons taken away. People from the Panjshiri Valley, for example, are very powerful because they have so many weapons. (Uzbek woman, 18 to 29 years, interviewed in Mazar-i-Sharif)

Last year's Loya Jirga was not satisfactory because most of the elected representatives were assigned by the ruling commanders and acted according to the wishes of those commanders. (Tajik male government employee, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kabul)

Some participants expressed fears that the difficulties seen in the ELJ will be carried over into the Constitutional Loya Jirga (CLJ) that will deliberate the country's forthcoming constitution.

The 1700 representative who participated in last Loya Jirga will chose 450 of 500 representatives to the next one [CLJ]. I'm not too optimistic because once again people will not freely elect their representatives. (Hazara male shopkeeper, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Bamiyan)

As we know, the representatives for this election were chosen from the representatives of last year's Loya Jirga. Surely we know that the majority of those delegates were not elected freely by the people, but were appointed by commanders and high-ranking leaders. Now, if these ill-famed representatives get together and elect delegates from

amongst themselves, the result once again will be negative and completely undemocratic. We completely disagree with this system and prefer direct elections with a secret ballot and no interference. (Uzbek male teacher, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Mazar-i-Sharif)

Despite disappointment over the ELJ, many participants remain optimistic that the CLJ will be more representative and democratic.

It [CLJ] had a negative result. It was bought. If you remember, no one had right to speak freely. They did not let Suraya Pardica complete her statement and they removed her from the stage. We expect the next Loya Jirga not to be the same as previous one. (Educated woman, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Kabul)

Some of the representatives were real but warlords' soldiers broke into their homes and warned them to vote a certain way. Most of the representatives were uneducated. The election wasn't free because militias were behind it. The conditions have changed a lot since last year. We are hopeful that the next election will be done very well; also, the government is more experienced. (Pashtun male, 45 to 60 years, interviewed in Jalalabad)

Constitution

The constitution must include input from Afghan citizens; there was disappointment with the consultation process to date

Those who participated in the focus group discussions had a general idea of the role of a constitution and its importance to the state.

The constitution is a national document and is said to be the mother of other laws. The constitution resembles a foundation. If this foundation is firm and solid from every point of view, we will not have any problems. (Pashtun male government employee, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kabul)

I think the constitution is the main law from which other laws are derived; thus it should respect and contain people's opinions and views. This is necessary for the rule of law in the county. (Hazara woman, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Bamian)

The constitution should be a law that does not change everyday. We see other countries that have just one constitution that does not change. But in Afghanistan when a government changes or collapses a new government drafts a new constitution. The constitution must be forever and must contain the public's ideas and views. (Tajik woman, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Herat)

Participants viewed the constitution as essential for defining the religious nature of society and indicated that it should represent the interests of the people. However, no participants specifically mentioned that the constitution should include Sharia law.

The constitution should be according to Islamic law and it should be equal to Islamic law. (Pashtun male, 45 to 60 years, interviewed in Jalalabad)

Women participants viewed the constitution as an essential legal instrument for protecting their rights.

The constitution should give rights to women and children. (Tajik woman, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Herat)

The constitution must defend the rights of women, because they are otherwise condemned in our society. (Uzbek woman, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Mazar-I-Sharif)

Some men don't want a constitution that prevents them from continuing their illegal activities; for example, here in Mazar we have seen many wealthy men who have four wives. Why should it be so and why should the women be so insulted to live in a house with three other rival wives? Such men constitutionally should not be allowed to do so. (Uzbek woman, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Mazar-I-Sharif)

Focus group participants who identified themselves as ethnic minorities viewed the constitution as a means of protection against future oppression and discrimination and identified such protection as the key to establishing lasting peace in the country.

The constitution should protect the rights of all people at all levels of society, no matter if they are Pashtun, Tajik or Hazara. This constitution is made forever and if they don't pay attention to this issue of equality, the country will suffer. (Tajik woman, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kabul)

The constitution must be based on Islamic rules and the people must abide by it. It also must encompass the wishes of all ethnic groups and their traditions. If the constitution is based on votes and wishes of one ethnic group such as the Tajiks, Pashtuns, Hazara or Uzbeks, the people of Afghanistan will not accept it. (Hazara male student, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kabul)

I believe that until the census is completed, federalism established, and the ethnic groups granted their privileges in a framework of a federal country, things will not improve. (Uzbek male, 45 to 60 years, interviewed in Mazar-I-Sharif)

Since there are many ethnic groups in Afghanistan, we hope the rights of Uzbeks will be protected. No ethnicity can take away the rights of other ethnicities. As Uzbeks, we have our own history, culture and pride. My greatest disappointment is that both the constitution and social laws insult us. (Uzbek male shopkeeper, 45 to 60 years, interviewed in Mazar-I-Sharif)

Participants identified a role for the constitution in establishing and protecting equality.

They say it [the constitution] is the mother of all rules and every individual has to obey it. (Uzbek woman, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Mazar-I-Sharif)

Participants also expressed the view that in order for the constitution to be successful, it must reflect the ideas and input of Afghan citizens.

The constitution must be drafted according to the will of the people. If the government wants to be successful, it should take into consideration the public's views on the constitution. (Educated woman, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kabul)

One thing that is necessary for the constitution is the inclusion of Afghans' opinions in the document. We want to have the draft constitution in our hands so that everyone can read it and make their suggestions on what should be changed. (Pashtun woman, 45 to 60 years, interviewed in Kandahar)

A few participants were aware of the constitutional consultation process conducted by the Afghanistan Constitutional Commission. This process included a limited number of public meetings and the circulation of handouts.

They are working on the constitution. They consult with people too. Amena Afzaly has recently come to Herat and talked to us about the constitution. (Tajik woman, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Herat)

Participants who were aware that a consultation process existed expressed frustration at not being able to participate due to the limited nature of the consultation. Those who learned of the process for the first time during the focus groups were also disappointed. A large majority of participants stated that all Afghans should be consulted in this important process.

We were at home. No one invited us. (Female homemaker, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Kabul)

If it is democracy, all people should participate. No one asks women from the districts what their problems are, so how can they express their ideas about the constitution and other issues? (Tajik woman, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Herat)

The constitution must even go to Kuchis who live in tents and who are completely ignorant and illiterate. (Uzbek woman, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Mazar-I-Sharif)

The draft constitution was not released until early November after the completion of this research. Due to the limited nature of the public consultation process, there was little public knowledge of the content of the draft and focus group participants could not discuss the prospective constitution in detail. Instead, participants discussed the obstacles to popular participation in the process.

This draft of the Constitution is incorrect because they said they would collect the people's ideas and announce the draft on Radio, TV and newspapers, so the people would understand what is written in the Constitution as we had before. But now we don't know what is in the Constitution and we can't say any thing about it. Questionnaires were distributed all over Afghanistan by both the government and NGOs, but we have still not seen the results. In the districts the people are even not aware of the process. (Pashtun woman, 45 to 60 years, interviewed in Kandahar)

Those who participated in this focus group research voiced a number of criticisms regarding the use of questionnaires to solicit input on the constitution from citizens. Participants stated that these questionnaires were distributed without clear background information and that no information campaign or public discussion was held prior to distribution. Participants felt that the use of questionnaires without additional public information excluded the illiterate and poorly educated, a majority of Afghanistan's population.

I have an idea about the questionnaires that were distributed to gather the ideas of the people about constitution: if the people had been offered a draft of the constitution first, there would have been no problems. If a student who has never studied a subject suddenly faces an exam, he can do nothing. Likewise, the majority of the people of the country do not know what a constitution is, so how can they be asked to make a judgment about it? (Uzbek government employee, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Mazar-I-Sharif)

In Doulat Abad district of Farib, where 80,000 people live, they only sent 400 questionnaires. Only nine to eleven people filled them out, which I think was not just. (Uzbek shopkeeper, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Mazar-I-Sharif)

We filled out the questionnaire and wrote our ideas and gave it to the constitution commission. I am not sure if it is lost. (Tajik male, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Herat)

Once they sent some papers to our ministry called questionnaires. There were a series of questions that sought the opinions and ideas of government employees, but they did not

come to re-collect the forms from people to whom they were given. (Tajik government employee, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kabul)

No one came and asked our ideas because we are illiterate. Ideas must be collected from everyone. (Uzbek woman, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Mazar-I-Sharif)

Elections

Disarmament was seen as key to successful elections; the UN was viewed as the most appropriate administrator of the elections

The Bonn Agreement established a timetable for general elections and requires that elections be held in June 2004, yet there is little pre-election activity, such as voter registration or civic education, and focus group participants are more concerned with, and better versed in, the election of representatives to the CLJ in December.

Some participants, however, were interested in discussing broader issues related to a general election such as determining eligibility through a voter or general registration process or perhaps even a census.

Only those people who have I.D cards are allowed to participate in the elections and vote. Unfortunately, 95 percent of our women and 80 percent of our men don't have I.D cards and this will prevent Hazara people from voting for their leaders. (Hazara shopkeeper, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Bamiyan)

Without statistics of the population we won't accept the coming election. (Uzbek male shopkeeper, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Mazar-I-Sharif)

Afghanistan's experience with elections has not been positive. Participants mentioned disappointment with the recent ELJ and others remembered the pretense of elections held during the period of Communist rule.

We participated before at the time of Communism, but that election was also without results and concerned only those who were elected beforehand; we want a free election. (Pashtun woman, 45 to 60 years, interviewed in Kandahar.)

Many participants linked the possibility of a successful election to first making substantial progress with disarmament.

My idea is this that weapons should be collected first. When the weapons are collected, then we will have a good election. (Pashtun male, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kandahar)

Participants expressed hope for a free, fair and properly run election.

It should be free so that all people can make their own choice. Elections shouldn't be bought by money; representatives shouldn't be bought so that they vote for certain people. It should be free and democratic. If it is a rigged election we will again experience conflict. (Tajik woman, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Herat)

With few reservations, participants viewed the United Nations as the most neutral and appropriate organization to organize and administer the general election.

The UN should be responsible. The UN should make a process composed of independent people from foreign countries to arrange the election process for the Afghan people. (Pashtun male, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kandahar)

The opinions expressed by focus group participants indicate that those chosen at any election in Afghanistan will face the same high expectation citizens have for their representatives around the world.

Representatives should be literate so that they can convey people's opinions, not just elect themselves to take money and cheat people. We don't need the kind representatives who fill their pockets. A representative should be formal and he should be sworn by government to deliver peoples ideas honestly and consult people. A representative should be for the people and not for himself. (Tajik woman, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Herat)

These representatives must represent people accurately. They must deliver the wishes of the people and also vote for those who are accepted by the people. This is their role, and nothing more than that. Their duty is to represent the people's ideas and vote for those who people want. (Pashtun female teacher, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Jalalabad)

They should take the voice of the people to high-ranking members of the government. They should not think about their personal benefits and those of their parties. They should find the real problems of people who have suffered sorrow and grief over the last 23 years. (Uzbek woman, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Mazar-I-Sharif)

They should be intelligent, experienced and famous. Also they should be from inside of Afghanistan, not from abroad—those people who were in Afghanistan and have seen the starvation, war, disaster, not those who spent all their lives in foreign countries. (Educated woman, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kabul)

Perceptions of the Transitional Administration

President Karzai was viewed positively, but expectations regarding economic development and reconstruction remain unmet

For focus group participants, the Transitional Administration is synonymous with President Hamid Karzai. When participants responded to questions about the Karzai government they simultaneously were describing what they perceived to be the strengths and weaknesses of the man and the institutions around him.

The best thing about the Karzai government is his establishing peace and security and paving the way for national unity. (Hazara male shopkeeper, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Bamiyan)

Participants indicated the importance of having political leaders who are in touch with the problems of ordinary Afghans and who are attuned to their needs and speak their language.

He attends meetings with the people, listens to their opinions and understands their situation and their problems and wishes. Another of his good activity is this: he goes to every province to meet people and understand their problems. For example, he visited one province after there was a huge storm and many people died and became homeless. (Female homemaker, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Kabul)

We have seen one of his positive points in his language; when he speaks, he expresses himself the same way as the people do. (Female employee, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kabul)

Focus group participants view Karzai as doing his job patiently and persistently and believe he has been successful in attracting important foreign assistance to the country for key rehabilitation projects. He is seen as possessing many positive qualities that make him a good leader.

He goes about with much patience. He attracted foreign help. Today, asphaltting and repaving of the Kabul/Kandahar highway is in progress. (Tajik male, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Herat)

Karzai is a good man. He knows about everything. Mr. Karzai is a hard working man but there is nobody to help him. (Pashtun male, 45 to 60 years, interviewed in Jalalabad)

Participants recognized the strides that have been taken towards establishing a free and fair government and expect the Karzai government to continue to undertake such efforts.

It is a transitional phase from war to peace. At least the foundation is being laid for proceeding towards lawful government, lawful rights for individuals, equality and tolerance. (Tajik male, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Herat)

I prefer Karzai's government to the Taliban's regime, but I have only a suggestion for him: he should look at all citizens the same and should not favor one tribe over another or his relatives to the other people. (Uzbek shopkeeper, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Mazar-I-Sharif)

Some steps have been adopted towards freedom of the press that are appreciated, as there are now many free and independent magazines and publications in the country. (Uzbek male, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Mazar-I-Sharif)

Some participants did express, however, the perception that government ministries within the Karzai government are not serving national interests, that bribery and nepotism are widespread, that there are not equal opportunities for all ethnic groups, and that President Karzai has little control over the ministries.

He says one thing, but the cabinet says another. He doesn't have any power over his cabinet. He makes promises, but cannot fulfill them. (Female schoolteacher, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kabul)

The majority of them work for their relatives. Bribe-taking has increased a lot in the ministries and they pay no attention to people. (Female homemaker, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Bamiyan)

He should advise his cabinet members to pay attention to the people. He is good, but some of his cabinet members just take bribes and cause problems. We have been suffering from war and conflict for 22 years. We want a man who brings us peace. We have peace but we are all hungry. We don't have any thing to eat. If they want us to die of hunger, then that is another matter. (Tajik female homemaker, 18 to 35 years, interviewed in Herat)

I haven't seen any Hazara in ministries of foreign affairs and defense. There are no Hazara generals and there is only one administrator in the ministry of education who is from the Hazara ethnic group. (Hazara male shopkeeper, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Bamiyan).

Focus group participants expressed general dissatisfaction with the cabinet.

When Hamid Karzai became president, there was a good chance for the people to have authority in the government, but instead Karzai collected all the commanders who were

fugitives during Taliban term and offered them power, and he didn't fulfill the promises he made to the people in the Loya Jirga. (Tajik male, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Herat)

Mr. Karzai was a very good person, but he did not make a good decision on his cabinet. The cabinet members don't work for the people's benefit, but for themselves their friends. (Pashtun woman, 45 to 60 years, interviewed in Kandahar)

I think the cabinet members are not entirely acceptable. One part of the cabinet is made up of gunmen and another part is western satellites, so I think they aren't accepted by the people. (Tajik male, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Herat)

They are not the ministers chosen by the people, they are the imposed ones. We don't support them. They are powerful people and either by internal or external interference and force they have conquered these positions. (Pashtun male, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kandahar)

After almost two years of transitional government, participants indicated high expectations for tangible signs of political and economic progress. Many participants expressed views that vital infrastructure has not been rebuilt throughout the country.

Every night we see and hear that Mr. Karzai went to Germany, France and other countries on T.V, but we haven't seen any results from this yet. (Uzbek female government employee, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kabul)

Maybe they have done something for themselves and their Pashtuns, but not for the people of the Northern provinces. Believe me, we have such poor families who need only a loaf of bread to eat, but all the charities and help from outside goes into their pockets and their acquaintances' stomachs. Therefore, we have very bad impressions of Karzai's government. (Uzbek male, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Mazar-I-Sharif)

It has been two years since the creation of the interim administration and transitional government, but Mr. Karzai has established even no school for us, no roads or other public installations. If Karzai opens some schools for our children and they are taught in their native language, then we will be glad about Mr. Karzai. (Uzbek male shopkeeper, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Mazar-I-Sharif)

Karzai's government has done nothing in terms of construction work in Bamiyan. (Hazara female homemaker, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Bamiyan.)

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

NGOs—both international and domestic—were often viewed as self-serving and profiting from the assistance they provide

Participants' perceptions of non-governmental organizations are mixed. Women seem to have had more contact with NGOs and have benefited more from the work of such organizations. Both male and female participants expressed suspicion regarding the motives of domestic and international NGOs. Predictably, NGOs that provide essential social services and training are viewed as beneficial. The presence and profile of foreign NGOs appears to be greater than that of Afghan civil society groups.

If they work for the benefit of the people it is good, but if they work to damage the government and people, then it is not good and they are not useful. (Hazara male shopkeeper, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Bamiyan)

NGOs gave us jobs. I know how to knit rugs and these NGOs paid us, and in this way we can help our family's economic status as well as serve our country and people. In this case, NGOs are good as they assist the government and country. (Tajik woman, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Herat)

NGOs can help the government. They have established some literacy courses so that we can learn and find jobs, because if we are illiterate, no one will employ us. For this reason, NGOs are important and they play a significant role in helping the government. (Tajik woman, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Herat)

The government must direct these establishments. (Hazara male shopkeeper, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Bamiyan)

Participants are suspicious of many of the NGOs' motives. These suspicions are partially linked to historical fears of foreign influence and interference in the country and partially linked to a perception that NGOs, both domestic and foreign, benefit financially from the assistance they provide. Suspicion regarding financial gain for NGOs is particularly strong in the area of infrastructure reconstruction.

These NGOs should be managed by the government so that the money does not all fall into personal pockets. (Pashtun male, 45 to 60 years, interviewed in Jalalabad)

I think there are more than 180 NGOs working inside Afghanistan, both domestic and foreign. The work of some NGOs has brought results, but some of them look after their own benefits. These groups have paid little attention to society in their work, but a few have real and honest activity. (Female private employee, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kabul)

Foreign NGOs were particularly singled out for criticism regarding what some focus group participants viewed as "elitist" hiring practices.

If we apply for a job there, they ask if we know how to speak English or use computers. During these bad times, I did not prepare my children by teaching them English or computers so that these NGOs would pay them salaries. They are just thinking about their own advantages. (Female civil servant, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Kabul)

Priorities

Security was the single greatest priority, followed closely by rebuilding the economy

The priorities for Afghans who participated in this research are rebuilding and improving the tangible aspects of their lives. Focus group participants stressed their hope for peace and security and indicated a belief that this can be achieved only through disarmament. Afghan citizens seek employment opportunities and those with jobs want to be paid regularly so that they can secure basic necessities.

First of all, the government should ensure security and the disarmament of the ethnic fighters. Second, it should help solve the economic problems of the people by opening some factories and other workplaces. (Woman, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Bamiyan)

The lack of houses, shelter and electricity as well as the weak economy are all problems faced by the people. The government should also pay salaries regularly and make schools for girls in order to rescue them from illiteracy. They should pave the way for jobs so that all people can return to their homes. (Tajik woman, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Herat)

If someone gets sick we don't have a convenient hospital. Pregnant women who live far from the city find it difficult to be taken to a hospital, and often they or their children die. Some even do not know what hospital is. We ask the government to establish some hospitals, mother-child clinics or training teams to educate people. [Uzbek woman, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Mazar-I-Sharif]

The first problem we have is security. Second, the people do not have food, and third, the people do not have houses. The government should pay attention to these problems and then the weapons should be collected and the government should create a national army. (Pashtun woman, 45 to 60 years, interviewed in Kandahar)

The slow formation of national army is a problem; we ask Mr. Karzai to force the army council to train new soldiers as fast as they can. Such an army then can disarm irresponsible people and bring peace and security to the region. (Pashtun man, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Kandahar)

We hope that it is a priority to guarantee national unity. (Uzbek male shopkeeper, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Mazar-I-Sharif)

The Future

Afghans remained optimistic about the future, and believed that the international community must remain engaged for a successful transition

Despite the tragic recent history of Afghanistan and the many challenges the country still faces, Afghans are generally optimistic about their future and the future of the country.

We are optimistic and we wish to have a peaceful, secure and independent homeland. (Hazara woman, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Bamiyan)

I believe that the coming five years must be better than the past five years. (Hazara male shopkeeper, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Bamiyan)

I am an optimist. I interpret and forecast a good future for Afghanistan. (Tajik woman, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Herat)

We love our country. We are hopeful for the future, and other foreign friends have promised contributions to us. (Tajik male, 18 to 30 years, interviewed in Herat)

For some, the ongoing engagement of the international community in Afghanistan's political transition is a cornerstone of this optimism.

We are optimistic, as before Afghanistan was forgotten by the world community but now they are keen to help us because they see that Afghanistan's problems have become the world's problems, due to terrorism. Therefore, the world cannot remain careless about Afghanistan. (Uzbek male, 30 to 45 years, interviewed in Mazar-I-Sharif)

APPENDIX A

THE DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF GROUPS

Kabul

Wednesday, 27 August 2003

10 am Ethnically mixed men (18 to 30 years) with high school education
(Pashtun, Uzbek, Tajik and Hazara participants) (11)

2 pm Ethnically mixed men (18 to 30 years) with some education
(Pashtun, Uzbek, Tajik and Hazara participants) (8)

Thursday, 28 August 2003

10 am Ethnically mixed women (18 to 30 years) with high school education
(Pashtun, Uzbek, Tajik and Hazara participants) (10)

2 pm Ethnically mixed women (30 to 45 years) with limited education
(Pashtun, Tajik and Hazara participants) (10)

Bamiyan

Monday, 1 September 2003

10 am Hazara male shopkeepers (18 to 30 years) with limited education
(Eight participants)

10 am Hazara female homemakers (30 to 45 years) with limited education
(12 participants)

Kandahar

Tuesday, 2 September 2003

10 am Pashtun men (18 to 30 years) with limited education
(Six participants)

Wednesday, 3 September 2003

10 am Pashtun women (45 to 60 years) with limited education
(Six participants)

Herat

Friday, 5 September 2003

10 am Tajik men (18 to 30 years) with high school education
(Six participants)

Saturday, 5 September 2003

10 am Tajik women (30 to 45 years) with limited education

Jalalabad

Saturday, 13 September 2003

10 am Pashtun men (45 to 60 years) with limited education

2 pm Pashtun women (18 to 30 years) with high school education
(11 participants)

Mazar-I-Sharif

Thursday, 25 September 2003

10 am Uzbek men (30 to 45 years) with high school to limited education
(11 participants)

2 pm Uzbek women (18 to 30 years) with limited education
(10 participants)

APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP GUIDELINES

AFGHAN PERSPECTIVES ON THE DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION

August – September 2003

I. Introduction

Moderator. Hello, my name is XXX, and I am the moderator for this discussion. My job is to move the conversation along and make sure that we cover several different subjects. There are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions that I will pose to you. The purpose of this research is to find out what the people of Afghanistan honestly think. In the new period for our country, where we hope that the people's voice will be respected, my colleagues and I believe it is important to find out what the opinions of the people really are. That is why there are no right answers or wrong answers. In fact, you may find that you disagree with another person's opinion, and I hope you will say so when that happens - - in a respectful and polite way, of course.

In fact, you may find today that you disagree with another person's opinion, that there are multiple valid opinions on the same question, and I hope you will say so when that happens, in a respectful and polite way, of course.

Important rule: one person speaking at one time. Because we want to respect everyone and make sure that everyone is heard, we have one basic rule in this session – we will allow only one person to speak at a time. We want to have an organized session, and in order to do this, I ask that you respect the person who is speaking, and wait for him [or her] to finish her thoughts.

Confidential/anonymous research. This discussion is completely anonymous and confidential. There will no record of what you say with your name on it. We are not going to quote anyone specifically. I have this small tape recorder, like a journalist, so that I can go back and be sure that I capture your words accurately for the research, but no one will know which person says any specific statement. This way, I do not have to take notes while we talk and I can concentrate on you and on our discussion.

Introductions. Now let's go around the table and introduce ourselves. Just say one thing about yourself, like where you were born or how many children you have.

[AFTER INTRODUCTIONS:] OK, thank you. Now let us begin.

II. Country Direction

First, tell me how are things going in the country these days? Are things going generally in the right direction?

What is the best thing about the current situation in Afghanistan at the present?

What is your biggest disappointment at this point?

III. Family Direction

How are things going these days for your family?

What is the best thing (happiest thing) that has happened in your family in recent months?

What has been the biggest disappointment for your family recently?

Do you have family members currently living in other countries? Which countries?

IV. Democracy

Now, we will shift to another subject. When I say the word "democracy" what comes to mind for you? (In just one word or a few words.)

In a democracy, what do you think the relationship between the government and the people should be? Does the government tell the people what to do or do the people tell the government what to do in a democracy?

What do you think is the place of the individual person in a democracy?

What do you think of individuals or independent groups – civic groups – that try to do things apart from the government on their own initiative? Is that a good thing, or not?

What are some examples of groups of citizens that are independent of the government?

What do you think about political parties?

What role should political parties play in the future of Afghanistan?

V. Islam and Democracy

Can Afghanistan have both democracy and Islam? Is Islam consistent with democracy?

In what way should Islam influence democracy in Afghanistan?

VI. Representation & Elections

A year on, what in your view has been the impact or the result of the *Loya Jirga*?

How well did the delegates to the *Loya Jirga* represent your interests or the interests of your community?

What experience have you had with elections? Can each participant briefly describe any elections they have participated in?

Elections have been proposed for June 2004, what does this mean to you?

What type of elections should take place?

What is the role for political parties in elections?

What is the role of elected representatives?

Who should be responsible for elections?

What can be done so you would accept or trust the final result?

What role is there for the international community in Afghanistan's elections?

VII. Constitution

A. What is the role or purpose of a Constitution? What does the word mean to you?

What is the role of ordinary Afghans in producing or writing a constitution?

Among those present, who has been involved in the Constitutional Consultation process? How did you participate? Why did you participate? What were your impressions of the consultation process?

For those who did not take part, what is your view of the Constitutional process?

How much support among Afghans like you will there be for the Constitution?

VIII. Karzai Government

How well do you think the Karzai Government is doing? How well have those who were chosen at the *Loya Jirga* governed Afghanistan?

What is the best thing it has accomplished?

What has been your biggest disappointment so far with the work of the Karzai Government?

Do you believe that the members of the Karzai Government are working for the best interests of the country overall -- or just for themselves and their friends?

If there were a disagreement between the Karzai Government and the international community about what is the right thing to do -- which opinion would prevail?

If there were a disagreement between the Karzai Government and local leaders around the country ["tribal leaders" for Pashtuns] about what is the right thing to do -- which opinion would prevail?

IX. Priorities

Tell me what you think the highest priority should be for the government. What is the most urgent problem that needs to be addressed?

What is the biggest obstacle the country faces?

X. Future

Are you optimistic or pessimistic about Afghanistan for the next year?

About the next five years?

Thank you. Those are all the questions I have for today.

APPENDIX C

NOTES ON METHODOLOGY

Focus Group Research

Focus group discussion is a semi-structured interview in which a trained facilitator guides between six and 12 participants through a series of related topics to discuss their opinions and the thinking and experiences that shape these positions. The facilitator works through the issues in the guide (Appendix B) using probing techniques or additional questions to encourage discussion as well as the deeper explanations and the expression of alternate or contradictory views.

The flexible format and open-ended questions allows participants more room to air their opinions and concerns related to the topics under discussions. It allows participants sufficient time to explain why they hold a particular opinion or belief.

Different from a series of one-on-one interviews, the focus group format allows other participants to challenge their views of other participants. This can be a productive dynamic as it moderates against extremism. With each group ideally consisting of a group of peers but people who do not know each other personally, the opinions voiced are those participants feel confident and comfortable enough to express in public.

Research Challenges in Afghanistan

There a number of caveats to any public opinion research conducted in Afghanistan. Since there has never been a full census conducted all the demographic data available for the country are estimates. For this research, demographic data from the US Census Bureau International Data Base, United Nations Development Program (UNDP), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and World Health Organization (WHO) were used to guide the project. However, after more than two decades of war, the deaths of more than one million people and the displacement of millions of others, the exact composition of the population is unknown. Related to these issues, in the course of the research the depopulated countryside and controversy surrounding the size of respective ethnic groups was experienced firsthand.

For the purposes of creating demographic targets, generalizations can be made about the Afghan population such as it is young, poorly educated and has a certain ethnic composition. Any close examination of these areas raises more questions than answers. With no centralized registers of births or deaths, population statistics are just educated guesses in a country plagued with generations of refugees, war and poor health conditions. As for education, we were not able to test for illiteracy, but high levels are widely assumed. However, one participant described herself as both having a 10th class education and being illiterate. Others did not indicate their education or literacy level when asked. As for ethnicity, the widely quoted National Atlas of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan, published in 1980, gives an ethnic breakdown for the country as Pashtun (38 percent), Tajik (25%), Hazara (19%), Uzbek (6%) and others (12%). However, minorities, even in the focus groups, are quick to dispute these figures

The poor security situation throughout much of the country also had an impact on the research. With armed militia still controlling much of the countryside the researchers working on this project were limited in the areas to which they could travel. Security had improved compared to the last time NDI sponsored research in Afghanistan in April – May 2002 and this allowed local partners to travel to regional towns to conduct such research. However, while the researchers were able to visit the provincial towns of Bamiyan, Herat, Jalalabad, Mazar-i-Sharif and Kandahar, their movements were limited to the towns themselves. Neither NDI nor the Institute's research partner—the Kabul-based Morning Social and Cultural Organization (MSCO)—felt that that the security situation was stable enough to conduct field research outside of these towns. It therefore

must be acknowledged that there is an urban bias to the research and this may in turn mean participants may be more educated than the general Afghan population living in the vulnerable and insecure countryside.

Furthermore, it is unclear what impact the security situation had on people's sense of their freedom to speak and discuss the issues at hand, many of which would have been considered highly sensitive in the past. NDI has found when conducting similar research in post-conflict situations around the world, participants hold back for some time after living many years under authoritarian or theocratic regimes. In such circumstance, the free expression of one's views can have serious and even deadly consequences. The legacy of authoritarian rule is the careful use of words and a reticence to speak out or stray too far from accepted norms. Discussion in the groups by participants about ongoing threats and intimidation against both men and women by armed militia and warlords can only suggest that there are ongoing limitations on freedom of expression in Afghanistan, a vital ingredient for focus group research to be truly effective. That said, the discussions were lengthy and the format was compatible with Afghan cultural norms and social practices. Especially important for Afghanistan—where conflict and culture has disrupted education for many years, particularly among women—focus group techniques are flexible enough and have been shown to create a space where both educated and illiterate can meet.

Focus groups are not quantifiable data and the results are not definitive and clear cut. They provide useful insights into motivations and reasoning of those who take part that can be helpful informing the design of ongoing programs and activities, but they cannot be used to create concrete conclusions from the very uncertain world in which most Afghans appear to live.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research is to inform political parties, civil society, government officials and the international community as to public attitudes toward political development in Afghanistan as the country enters the Constitutional Loya Jirga process. Secondly, the focus group research is designed to provide NDI with the views of Afghan men and women in order to more effectively tailor the Institute's program activities in the country.

Research Partner

An NDI team designed this research project with the focus groups conducted in all six locations by staff of the Kabul-based Morning Social and Cultural Organization (MSCO), a local non-governmental organization. Focus group participants were only told that the MSCO was conducting the research and were not informed of its relationship with NDI. This standard opinion research practice of shielding participants from the organization that has commissioned the research is designed to prevent participants using the focus groups to "send a message" to political parties, government, international organizations or foreign governments. It also helps create an atmosphere of confidence among participants with Afghans speaking and listen to other about their issues and challenges facing their country.

The Groups

It is standard practice in focus group research to recruit participants for each discussion who, while having certain characteristics in common, are not personally known to each other. In ideal circumstances, the participants should be randomly recruited, although security and freedom of movement issues meant that this goal was not always achieved with this research.

In the capital Kabul, it was decided to mix the ethnicities among the groups. This experiment was based on experience elsewhere and on the advice of local colleagues who contended that the more educated, urban and cosmopolitan Kabulis had less difficulty mixing with participants from other ethnic groups than participants in outlying provinces. In the provincial groups, with one exception, all the participants were recruited from the dominant ethnic group of that area. The

impression was that the experiment worked in that different ethnicities offered varying viewpoints that often led to lively discussions.

Moderators

Four moderators in two teams from the Morning Social and Cultural Organization were used for this research. Ms. Gul Ghotai and Mr. Mohammad Daud Nurzai, both Pashtu and Dari speakers conducted respectively female and male groups in Jalalabad, Kandahar and Herat. Ms. Gul Ghotai, who also worked on NDI's research last year, also conducted the women's groups in Kabul. Mr. Mohammad Salim Tole and Ms. Fahima were responsible for conducting groups in Bamiyan and Mazar-i-Sharif. Ms. Salim Tole moderated the male groups in Kabul. The moderators were trained and supervised by NDI Senior Advisor on Citizen Participation Jim Della-Giacoma and Kabul-based Program Manager Dr. Hussain Ramoz, who also managed the facilitators in the field.

Transcripts and translation and the report

Of the 14 focus group discussions conducted as part of this research, 10 were conducted in Dari and four were in Pashtu. All 14 focus groups were recorded on audiotape and a written transcript produced in English for each group. Based on those transcripts, this analysis and report was prepared in English by NDI. It will be translated back into Dari and Pashtu for local distribution.