Talking about and Doing Elections: The Shaping of a Local Electoral Field in Western Afghanistan

Accepted version of an article published in *Central Asian Affairs*:
Kazemi, Said Reza. " Talking about and Doing Elections: The Shaping of a Local Electoral Field in Western Afghanistan", *Central Asian Affairs* 5, 2 (2018): 160-176.

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Abstract

This paper investigates elections as the construction of a two-faceted field in a semi- urban area in Herat, western Afghanistan. Looking at Afghanistan's 2014 presidential and provincial council elections, the paper first surveys the elections as a discursive field. It tries to understand what the local people, given their historical and social con- texts, said about the elections. The second facet examines the elections as a performative field, attempting to unpack how local actors enacted the elections. The paper shows that an election's discursive and performative framing needs to be situated in the wider historical and social contexts of a place. It also shows that in a place where there is greater freedom immediately following an oppressive era (for instance, that of the Taliban) and where there is egalitarianism among elites, the election is turned into a lively and unpredictable process where the discourse is marked by polyphony and instability, and the performance is characterized by mobilization of ties on various fronts and by shifting differentiation of local actors on political, generational, gender, and other grounds.

Keywords

election – discourse – performance – field – Afghanistan

Introduction

This paper uses life story study, unstructured in-depth interview, and participant observation methods to examine the shaping of a local-level electoral

doi 10.1163/22142290-00502004

field in a semi-urban township in the suburbs of Herat city in Herat province, western Afghanistan. Focusing on Afghanistan's 2014 simultaneous presidential and provincial council elections, the paper first introduces the township and its historical and social contexts in order to prepare the discussion on the construction of a local-level electoral field. Analysis of the historical and social contexts is instrumental to understanding how the elections unfolded in the township. This paper examines the 2014 elections in this township as two interdependent discursive and performative fields. It looks at how the elections were talked about and practiced by various local actors in the township. The paper will show the context-specificity, instability, and polyphony of electoral discourses and the agency of local actors in demarcating the electoral field horizontally and vertically and in a rapidly shifting and unpredictable fashion. The township study presented here differs from the existing literature in some significant respects. Previous studies on Afghan political movements have mostly focused on the national level,[1] whereas this study zeroes in on the grassroots-level history and practice of a few affiliates of one major Afghan political party, *Hezb-e Wahdat* (Party of Unity), which is almost entirely composed of Shia Hazaras and Sayyeds. This local-level study of political activity is important because it reveals concrete political behavior rather than abstract political ideology. This local political behavior is further studied by focusing on the 2014 presidential and provincial council elections and how these elections unfolded in the township. In contrast to previous studies of Afghan elections that have, among other things, brought up the role of the political broker in linking candidates to vote banks and thereby helping determine the electoral outcome,[2] this study downplays the significance of such an individual. This is because the role played by the political broker is greatly weakened in egalitarian rural and semi-urban areas, such as the township under study. This

1 Antonio Giustozzi, "March towards Democracy? The Development of Political Movements in Afghanistan," *Central Asian Survey* 32, no. 3 (2013): 318–35; Niamatullah Ibrahimi, *The Hazaras and the Afghan State: Rebellion, Exclusion and the Struggle for Recognition* (London: Hurst, 2014); Thomas Ruttig, *Islamists, Leftists - and a Void in the Center: Afghanistan's Political Parties and Where They Come From (1992–2006)* (Kabul: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, undated).

2 Martine van Bijlert, "How to Win an Afghan Election: Perceptions and Practices," Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2009; Noah Coburn and Anna Larson, *Derailing Democracy in Afghanistan: Elections in an Unstable Political Landscape* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014). See also Martine van Bijlert, "Who Controls the Vote? Afghanistan's Evolving Elections," Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2010; Noah Coburn, *Bazaar Politics: Power and Pottery in an Afghan Market Town* (Stanford, ca: Stanford University Press, 2011).

observation has been made in the past,3 but prior research has not explicitly investigated how socioeconomic egalitarianism impacts electoral discourse and practice.

Introducing the Township: The Historical and Social Contexts

Ayanda Township4 was founded around 25 years ago, in 1992.5 Its construction was begun by Afghans who returned from Iran following the fall of the Afghan communist government in the early 1990s. These returnees bought the land on which the township stands from local Sunni Tajik landowners. Today, townships such as Ayanda are part of a vast and growing "fringe area" in Afghanistan's urban landscape. Because they are mostly unplanned and unofficial settlements, they face an uncertain future: they might stay or go.6 Recent policy discussions call for them to remain and be regulated, with a view to the eventual inclusion of these settlements in the country's formal urban land- scape, but there has not yet been a final decision.7

In several ways, the Ayanda Township is a representation—or, to put it more strongly, a microcosm—of Afghanistan's recent historical and social develop- ments. When the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan and the Afghan communist government of President Najib fell in the early 1990s, not only did provincial and local politics change in Herat, but an increasing number of Afghans who had fled to neighboring Iran during communist rule returned to Afghanistan, and to Herat in particular.

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3 Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, *Informal Order and the State in Afghanistan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); "Taking Village Context into Account in Afghanistan," Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2015.

4 The name of the township has been changed in order to protect the anonymity of the local people under study.

5 Townships such as Ayanda are known to the local people as *shahrak* (little city, little town, township) and to urban development authorities as informal settlements. I follow the local people in using the term "township/*shahrak*" to refer to these settlements.

6 "Land Governance Assessment Framework (LGAF) Afghanistan," World Bank, 2015, http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTDEC/EXTRESEARCH/EXTPROGRAMS/EXTARDR/EXTLGA/0,,contentMDK:23534852~pagePK:64168445~piPK:64168309~theSitePK:7630425,00.html.

7 H. Detlef Kammeier and Zabihullah Issa, "Urban Governance in Afghanistan: Assessing the New Urban Development Programme and Its Implementation," Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, June 2017.

Among the returnees to Herat in the early 1990s were two Shia Sayyeds, Haidar and Hashem,8 affiliates of *Hezb-e Wahdat*, who chose to buy land and settle in Herat instead of returning to their places of birth (in Ghazni and Daikundi provinces, respectively). These men played an instrumental role in the founding of Ayanda Township. A major reason for their decision to settle in Herat was the continued uncertainty about Afghanistan's future after the fall of the communist government. If violent conflict were to resume, it would be easier for them to flee to Iran from Herat, a border province, than from Ghazni or Daikundi, which are located in the far more distant *Hazarajat*, or Central High- lands Region. At the same time, they believed the Iranian government would never allow the naturalization of Afghans—even those like Hashem, who had lived there with his family for over 20 years—meaning that Afghan refugees and migrants would someday be compelled to leave Iran and repatriate.9

As affiliates of *Hezb-e Wahdat*, Haidar and Hashem had developed some familiarity10 with the political-military organizations of other *mujahedin*, including the Sunni and predominantly Tajik *Jamiat-e Islami* (Islamic Community). As part of the *jihad*, or religiously sanctioned armed struggle, against communist rule of Afghanistan, Haidar and Hashem had coordinated and collaborated with *Jamiat-e Islami* affiliates on logistics, the transfer of wounded *mujahedin* to Iran for medical treatment, and the mobilization and training of Afghan refugees in Iran for military engagements in Afghanistan.11 *Jamiat-e Islami*'s strongest representative in the region, Ismail Khan, had recently replaced the communist government as the provincial governor of Herat. More importantly, Haidar and Hashem's engagement in the *jihad* and with the *mujahedin* had made it possible for them to get to know and relate to people be- yond their immediate sub-religious and ethnic communities.12 In a way, they

8 Names have been changed to protect individuals' privacy.

9 Fariba Adelkha and Zuzanna Olszewska, "The Iranian Afghans," *Iranian Studies* 40, no. 2 (2007): 137–65.

10 David Morgan, *Acquaintances: The Space between Intimates and Strangers* (New York: Open University Press, 2009).

11 On the "refugee warrior community," see Aristide R. Zolberg, Astri Suhrke, and Sergio Aguayo, "International Factors in the Formation of Refugee Movements," *International Migration Review* 20 (1986): 151–69; Aristide R. Zolberg, Astri Suhrke, and Sergio Aguayo, *Escape from Violence: Conflict and the Refugee Crisis in the Developing World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

12 I differentiate between *din* and *maz'hab*. The Farsi/Dari term *din* refers to religions (Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and so on), while the term *maz'hab* indicates a subdivision within a religion, such as Sunni and Shia Islam. I therefore use "sub-religion" for the noun *maz'hab* and "sub-religious" for the adjective *maz'habi*.

had become trans-sub-religious and trans-ethnic individuals; they had turned into what can be called cultural brokers, or "everyday diplomats,"13 between people from different sub-religious and ethnic backgrounds in an Afghanistan fraught with sub-religious(Sunni versus Shia) and ethnic (Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, and so on) differences, primarily at the higher political echelons of thesociety.14

Ismail Khan's representatives had ordered a government-owned hotel in downtown Herat to provide board and lodging for Haidar after his return to Afghanistan from the Iranian city of Mashhad. Haidar had come alone, leaving his family in Mashhad. Hashem, by contrast, moved with his family from Mashhad to Herat, where they lived in a rented house in the city. The way the new *mujahedin* administration treated Haidar and Hashem clearly showed that the former was a more highly placed affiliate of *Hezb-e Wahdat* than the latter. However, as I learned, both were part of the middle ranks of *Hezb-e Wahdat*. Moreover, the fact that the *mujahedin* had, with outside support (from the region and beyond), defeated the Soviet-backed Afghan communist government raised questions about the role and future of the *mujahedin* and their *tanzims* (political-military organizations) in Afghanistan after communist rule.

Believing that Iran would never become a "home" for Afghan refugees and migrants, and knowing that Afghanistan's future continued to be uncertain even after the victory of the *mujahedin*, Haidar and Hashem began establishing relationships with local Tajik inhabitants and landowners, with a view to creating a foothold in Herat—which bordered the area of Iran where Haidar and Hashem and their families had taken asylum during the war—instead of returning to their *Hazarajat* communities of origin. One of the local ethnic Tajiks they met was Wahab, who ran the government-owned hotel that provided Haidar with board and lodging. Wahab also owned many plots of inherited land in and around Gozara district, about 15 kilometers (9.3 miles) to the southof Herat city proper.

Initially, the trans-ethnic relationship between the Shia Sayyeds—Haidar and Hashem—and the Sunni Tajik, Wahab, was based on an economic

13 Madeleine Reeves, "Diplomat, Landlord, Con-Artist, Thief: Housing Brokers and the Mediation of Risk in Migrant Moscow," *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 34, no. 2 (2016): 93–109.

14 As the historical narrative on the founding of Ayanda Township shows, most ordinary Afghans were generally on good terms with one another, despite their different sub-religious and ethnic origins. I therefore argue that the sub-religious and ethnic differences were mainly raised and propagated at the higher political levels of society in an attempt to mobilize supporters for political, military, and other ends.

foundation: money for land. As time went on, they developed stronger ties: they dined at each other's homes and their wives became acquainted. Haidar and Hashem connected Wahab and his Sunni Tajik Gozara-based landowner relatives and friends with their Shia Sayyed and Hazara acquaintances in Herat as well as in Iran, chiefly in Mashhad and Tehran. They went on business trips to Mashhad and Tehran, trying to convince Afghan refugees and migrants there to buy land in Herat—for, as they put it, "Iran will never become a home for Afghans and … Afghans, particularly the landless ones, need to have a foothold in their own country." An increasing number of Afghan refugees and migrants bought plots of land from Wahab and his landowner friends. The business thrived and Haidar, Hashem, and Wahab continued to turn a profit. Hashem and Wahab, in particular, became very close friends. Hashem spoke playfully and intimately in front of Wahab:

> Wahab and I have known each other for over 20 years. We are best friends. I have always told my relatives and friends that everything about Wahab is good and he would be even better if he converted to Shia Islam!

Wahab responded in a similar playful and intimate manner:

> Everything is also good about Hashem and he would be better if he became a Sunni Muslim! Hashem knows all of my relatives and friends in Gozara, and I know all of Hashem's relatives and friends in Herat and in Mashhad and Tehran. Whenever I go to Kabul—where Hashem currently lives—or to Iran, I always stay with him and his relatives and friends. I never go and book a room in a hotel in those places. Our relationship is now more than money.

Having bought the land from Wahab, Hashem laid the first clay brick to construct a house in what would eventually become Ayanda Township. He was followed by a number of relatives, including his cousins, as well as his acquaintances and friends. Haidar built an orchard on the land he had bought from Wahab. Upon his return to Afghanistan, Hashem ceased to work with *Hezb-e Wahdat* and instead used his Russian Jeep to transport passengers from Herat to the Afghan-Iranian border and back via Islam Qala. Instrumentalizing his former ties with Afghan refugees and migrants in Iran and his position as a driver bringing Afghan returnees from Islam Qala to Herat, Hashem continued to persuade recent returnees to consider buying land in the future Ayanda Township. Several of these returnees were formerly connected to *Hezb-e Wahdat*.

When Haidar, Hashem, and their relatives and friends started constructing houses, they met resistance from Sunni Tajiks in neighboring Gozara district. The strongest resistance came from people close to then-provincial governor Ismail Khan and then-mayor Gholam Yahya Akbari Siawushani. Rumors spread that Haidar, Hashem, and their relatives and friends were "Iranian spies" and should not be allowed to carve out a foothold for themselves anywhere in Herat. The then-provincial governor and mayor reportedly opposed the presence of non-Tajik and non-Herati returnees in Herat and called for them to return to their "original birthplaces," with the goal of keeping Herat an "intact Sunni Tajik" city.15 The provincial government threatened to demolish the buildings that were going up in Ayanda Township. To avoid drawing unwanted attention, the local builders resourcefully continued constructing houses during the night. By the time the Taliban captured Herat, some 15 houses had been constructed and inhabited in Ayanda Township. In fact, many residents of the township were somewhat happy about the Taliban's rise to power, since this removed the threats made against the township by the previous provincial regime. However, several inhabitants, including Hashem, fled Taliban rule and again sought asylum in neighboring Iran. For Ayanda Township residents like Hashem, migration has never been a two-stage process of departure and re- turn, but is a continuous cycle of going and coming.16

Construction continued for several years during Taliban rule. Local residents built more shelters—basic houses made of clay bricks, since the vast majority of residents could not afford to construct houses made of fired bricks. Toward the end of the 1990s, construction came to a halt and the Taliban filed a lawsuit with a view to driving all Shia Sayyeds and Hazaras out of Ayanda Township. According to Askar, who replaced Hashem as the township representative after the latter fled Taliban rule:

> The Taliban used to come and harass boys and men in the township. Some of them occupied the houses whose owners had left the township. For example, Hashem's house was occupied by a Talib. However, they did not harass girls and women. They filed a lawsuit based on *sha'f* in the Hanafi

15 Tajik urban developers, informal conversations with Said Reza Kazemi, Herat, 2014–2015.

16 Alessandro Monsutti, *War and Migration: Social Networks and Economic Strategies of the Hazaras of Afghanistan* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005); Kristian Berg Harpviken, *Social Networks and Migration in Wartime Afghanistan* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Robert D. Crews, *Afghan Modern: The History of a Global Nation* (Cambridge, ma: Harvard University Press, 2015).

> legal school of Islam. This means they did not want to drive us out of the township through brute force, but wanted to use their court system to do so. According to *sha'f*, when a person wants to sell his land, he first needs to obtain the consent of his neighbors, and only if his neighbors decline to buy his land can he sell it to another person … A large landowner who was a neighbor of Wahab and his friends claimed that when Wahab sold his land to Haidar, Hashem, and others, he had not secured his consent. He claimed the right of *sha'f* over Wahab's land. The case went through the primary and secondary courts in Herat, but no final decision was made, because the local residents refused to accept the claim made by Wahab's neighbor. So the case was referred to the Taliban Supreme Court in Kandahar. I went there [Kandahar] as the representative of the township people. I had just arrived there when the September 11 incident hapened. The Americans launched their air strikes against the Taliban. The Taliban regime collapsed just before this case was going to be finalized by their Supreme Court. If the Taliban had stayed, there would have been no Ayanda Township, as they would have used their legal system to drive all of us from our lands and houses in the township.

It is interesting to note that even a local community like Ayanda Township was not untouched by the globally transformational events of 9/11. From late 2001 onwards, it developed tremendously. From its simple beginnings with around 15 houses in the early 1990s, the township now consists of an estimated 2,000 houses, many of them built of concrete and with two or three stories. There have also been considerable socio-demographic developments. The population has grown to some 10,000 people, of whom a vast number are Shia Hazaras and Sayyeds, not only the returnees who opted to carve out a life for themselves in a strategic province, but also great numbers of people from all over *Hazara- jat* (Ghazni, Daikundi, Uruzgan, and Bamyan provinces, to mention the major ones). Most families have one or more members spread transnationally in Afghanistan's immediate neighborhood, particularly Iran and Pakistan, as well as further afield in Europe, the us, and Australia.17 In terms of political and economic power and influence in the township, the original key players have disappeared from the scene (Haidar died in Iran, Hashem has moved to Kabul, and Wahab no longer owns land in the township). The township is governed by the National Solidarity Program (NSP)-created Community Development

17 Said Reza Kazemi, "Afghan Exodus: Maruf's Tale of an Emerging Transnational Community between Herat and Europe," Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2016.

Council (CDC).18 The township elite (elders, religious leaders, landowners, businesspeople, and educated youth) is more or less egalitarian in nature, and as such, political and economic power is no longer in the grip of a few.

On a broader provincial level, most of Herat's Hazaras and Shia Sayyeds are newcomers to the province, having settled there during the last 20 years. Support from this community's co-ethnic politicians in Kabul has been crucial, given that the province is predominantly Tajik (or Farsiwan) with a large Pashtun minority, and that successive Herat provincial governments have been opposed to the new Hazara/Sayyed settlements in and around Herat, as explained above. The development of Herat as a city and as a multi-ethnic entity continues apace, with several ongoing urban development projects around the city. According to one Tajik urban developer, the newcomers have in practice defeated Ismail Khan's conception of Herat as a purely Tajik/Farsiwan city.19 No matter how the leading members of the province feel about the newcomers, they are important electorally and are being courted.

The 2014 Presidential Elections: A Two-Faceted Field in theTownship

The 2014 presidential elections were crucial to the continuity of Afghanistan's post-Taliban state. Despite widespread fraud and irregularity that severely undermined the integrity of the electoral process and the legitimacy of its outcome, these elections were vital in paving the way for the first peaceful transfer of political power and leadership in Afghanistan's tumultuous history. President Hamid Karzai's two terms of office expired and the elections led to his replacement by Mohammad Ashraf Ghani, whose coalition with Abdullah Abdullah inaugurated the National Unity Government.20

This paper zeroes in on these elections in Ayanda Township, which is, as explained above, a microcosm of Afghanistan's recent historical and social transformations: political change, back-and-forth migration, population displacement, and the agency of individuals in forging trans-ethnic and

18 Aarya Nijat et al., "Subnational Governance in Afghanistan: The State of Affairs and the Future of District and Village Representation," Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2016.

19 Tajik urban developer, conversation with Said Reza Kazemi, Herat, January 25, 2014.

20 See, for instance, Barnett Rubin and Georgette Gagnon, "The U.S. Presence and Afghanistan's National Unity Government: Preserving and Broadening the Political Settlement," New York University's Center on International Cooperation, August 9, 2016.

trans-sub-religious ties. It looks at the 2014 presidential elections as a two-faceted field. The paper first investigates the elections as a discursive field. It tries to understand what local people, given their socio-demographic status, said about the elections. Secondly, the paper looks at the elections as a performative field. It tries to unpack how local actors performed the elections.

The Discursive Field: Context-Specific, Unstable, and Polyphonic Discourses

It was an afternoon in early 2014 when word came that the only provincial council candidate from Ayanda Township had invited what he called the "cultured and intellectual youth" (*jawanan-e farhangi wa roshanfekr*) to a pre-election event at his home. "We're gonna eat *shurwa-ye gusht-e gusfand*," one of the invited youths blurted out.21 Different young people affiliated with various cultural centers in Ayanda Township discussed their plans before heading to the candidate's house that evening.

The young people I knew spoke at the meeting of their disillusionment. Significantly, this had been caused not by the *outcome* of the previous presidential elections (which had been marked by massive fraud and irregularity), but by the youths' belief that they had not been given the financial rewards they had been promised for their local campaign activity by the Karzai team that was in power in distant—and, as they see it, corrupt—Kabul. One of the leading youth activists in the township, who was in charge of campaign finance in the township in the 2009 presidential elections, lamented that of some USD$100,000 spent on Karzai's campaign in Herat province, only AFN 50,000—around USD$1,000—had come to them. "They went and did not look behind them once they had won," he said. "We should have clearer demands this time and know in advance how much will be ours out of the overall campaign expenditure for Herat." The group agreed upon this as their condition for carrying out any campaign activity in the 2014 elections.

The event at the candidate's house ended with no clear conclusion as to whether the participants would categorically support him or not, but it was unusually candid both on the part of the candidate and on the part of the participating youth, thanks to the fragile post-2001 freedom of expression in the country. As could have been predicted, the candidate evoked his common

21 *Shurwa-ye gusht-e gusfand* is the favorite Afghan meal of soup (*shurwa*) with mutton, which is considered tastier, more expensive, and more dignified than *shurwa* with, say, chicken.

ground with the young people. He said he was from the same township as them and that he depended on them to help him make his way to the provincial council. The more skeptical among the young people pressed him for a hint of his political and financial clout, but in vain.

Most of the conversations that evening revolved around how to make a living, employment, and semi-urban development—and how these topics connected with the elections. The discursive claims made by the participants included the following:

> It is now time to get money from and milk all the candidates and the "haves" behind them, but we will vote for our township's candidate in the end.
> Tonight we eat your food, so we will vote for you.
> The winner of any election in Afghanistan is the one who feeds the most people.
> We should have someone in the government to help us get passports, install some of us in some school as teachers and in other places— [benefits] some other people [have enjoyed] and that bring development to our township.
> We should use every opportunity inside and outside the mosque to make our candidate known and help him succeed in his bid.

These demands are, to some extent, predictable, as it has now been several years since the land and housing market stagnated, construction work has largely come to a halt, and employment for the uneducated has considerably declined in Herat's suburbs. Herat has also seen an increase in crime, particularly kidnappings and thefts. In Ayanda Township, there have been several security-related incidents, including at least two cases of kidnappings and fights among the youth, in the past year. The criminal landscape is, however, complicated, because it is likely that these incidents also had something to do with existing personal enmities and other inter-personal, intra-community, and inter-community grievances (e.g., land and marriage disputes), in addition to purely financial motives. The township has been exploring ways its remaining youth can patrol the area at night and ensure safety, using simple shotguns bought at the marketplace in Herat.

In order to understand the elections as a discursive field in this semi-urban area, one needs to place the discourses made by various local actors (such as the candidate and the youth) within a broader social context. Moreover, a change in the social context where a discourse is made might change the content of that discourse. The youth offered different discourses among themselves, as well

as in the meeting with the candidate at his house. Additionally, the discourses used at this local level differ markedly from the election-related discourses employed at the higher political levels of society (by presidential hopefuls and their campaign spokespeople, for example). While at the national and provincial political level most of the electoral discourses revolved around issues of a higher political, security, economic, and social nature (democratization, rights, peace talks, and regional cooperation), local-level discourse in places like Ayanda Township focused on very concrete matters—such as money, jobs, and mutton soup—as they related to the elections.

In addition to the context-specificity of discourse, an investigation of the election atmosphere in Ayanda Township reveals the instability of various local actors' discourses on the elections. As in every general election, the elite of Ayanda Township, particularly elders, had deep concerns about their future security and economic survival. Surrounded by people from other ethno-political backgrounds, the township's elders carefully studied their options, trying to strike a tricky balance between their short- and long-term wellbeing. Several elders talked about the elections as "a cause of corruption and discord" (*maye- ye ekhtelaf wa fesad*) and "*se ruz*" (literally "three days," i.e. transient). However, these were the elders' *public* discourses; the discursive framing changed when they were engaged in private conversations between confidantes and in behind-the-scenes deal-making. All in all, the discourses were unstable, context-dependent, and shaped by numerous public and private influences. Given the largely egalitarian nature of this particular township's elite and politics, the electoral discourses were identified by their context-specificity, instability, and polyphony, making it enormously difficult to read the intentions and positions behind the discourses that were being produced and delivered.

The Performative Field: Horizontal and Vertical Demarcations of the Township

Practically speaking, Ayanda Township had an extremely lively and bustling electoral ambience. In this township, campaigning for the 2014 presidential and provincial council elections began well before the official start date of February 2, 2014. The candidates increasingly made themselves known to ordinary people, and small groups of activists began to hold meetings— mostly at night and away from the public eye. For weeks after the official launch of the campaign period, there was confusion and hectic maneuvering in the township. Meetings—big and small, private and public—were held daily in mosques, real estate agencies, shops, and homes. Rumors circulated about who

supported whom, who brought whose campaign to which part of the town- ship, and who made how much money from it.

The various local actors performed and enacted the elections by demarcating the electoral field in constantly shifting horizontal and vertical ways. Horizon- tally, the local electoral field was being created and recreated by various local actors or groups of actors. Firstly, there were the *kalanha* (elders and people with influence), including CDC members, so-called white-beards, *mullas*, busi- nesspeople, and landowners. In a way, these figures are the township's aristocracy or elite. The *kalanha* were the most influential actors, because they could mobilize large numbers of followers based on the strength of their kinship, affinity, neighborhood, and acquaintance ties. Additionally, their political and economic circumstances were more established than those of many residents of the township, the majority of whom were day laborers and landless tenants. As time went by, negotiations among the elders regarding which candidate(s)
to support became rougher and more divisive. However, they vowed not to cause fallings-out among themselves by engaging in such provocative acts as fixing an excessive number of one candidate's posters in an area where the elders supported another candidate. The *kalanha* began dividing the electoral field into the lower, middle, and upper parts of the township, trying to satisfy as many of their *kalanha* counterparts and other local residents as they could. The stakes were high locally and nationally, so it was difficult to decide on a fixed position. The decisions the *kalanha* made were made not at public events but in private conversations between confidantes and in behind-the- scenes deals. In general, local politics were outwardly clear-cut but inwardly complicated and concealed, because actors weighed numerous interests and concerns in their decision-making processes.

In addition to being divided by the *kalanha*, the electoral field was also contested along generational and gender lines. As part of this, there were two groups of youth: youth that were locally called *jawanan-e farhangi* ("cultured youth") and petty youth gangsters. The youth also mattered electorally, be- cause they comprised the largest category of voters in the township.22 Over the past decade, the cultured youth had gradually begun to suspect the intentions of the elders; they were generally dissatisfied with the way their township was being managed and developed by the elders. Most of these youth accused the elders of misappropriating public funds allocated for the development of

22 Given the fact that Afghanistan is a youthful country (around 70 percent of the population is young people), youth comprise the largest segment of voters at the national level, too. See "National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment 2011–12," Central Statistics Organization of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2014.

their township. As such, the cultured youth ceased to "listen to their elders" and began to compete with them, prompting the elders to condemn the youth as "sheep without a shepherd."23

The youth gangsters were involved in petty crime, such as extortion of the local population. Most were out of school and unemployed; several were drug addicts. Nonetheless, they had strong friendship ties. Some of these youths saw the elections primarily as an opportunity for playful chatter, making some money, or at least "eating some good food in some campaign offices." The township's authorities—parental, religious, official, or otherwise—were largely unable to control these youths or even tie them to the institutions run by their cultured peers, such as schools or local cultural centers.

Both kinds of youth organizations—the cultured ones and the gang members—differed from their parents and the elders, primarily in that their parents and the elders had generally been raised in rural areas with little connection to the outside world, whereas today's youth lived around contemporary Herat, a large urban space with ancient and ever-increasing links to the rest of the world, particularly neighboring Iran and Turkmenistan. Nevertheless, strong differences existed between the two youth groups. They rarely met or interacted with one another, and each seemed to be moving on its own path into the future in terms of socialization and attitudes toward education, employment, and life in general.

Importantly, girls and women also became active in the elections. Many girls found elections "an interesting subject to talk about and to make fun of, imitating the ways several presidential candidates [spoke and behaved]." Underneath this playful talk, however, there were serious and profound concerns, as these girls, particularly the ones who had just entered university, were worried about the impact of the elections on their future: educationally, professionally, and otherwise. More mature women undertook more organized initiatives. Apparently urged by their male relatives or colleagues in the CDC and other local institutions, female CDC members and other women with influence (employed women contributing to their families' economic well-being, in particular) got involved in negotiations about supporting a specific presidential candidate. However, there were generational differences: older women tended to walk in the footsteps of their male relatives, while younger, better educated, and more professional women and girls were more independently oriented.

Vertically, the local actors (whether *kalanha*, cultured youth, petty youth gangsters, girls, or women) drew on their past relationships and built new relationships with the presidential candidates, either directly in the national capital

23 Several *kalanha*, conversations with Said Reza Kazemi, Herat, January and February 2014.

(Kabul) or through presidential candidates' campaign offices in the provincial center (Herat city). The *kalanha* had long-standing ties with former *tanzims*, which have evolved into party-like organizations in post-2001 Afghanistan. In this township, these parties (primarily the two wings of *Hezb-e Wahdat*, one led by former mp Mohammad Mohaqqeq and one by former Second Vice- President Abdul Karim Khalili, which supported the two leading presidential candidates, Mohammad Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, respectively) provided political, financial, and other support in the form of privately run schools, higher education institutions, clinics, orphanages, and charities. Such projects connected the parties to the electorally significant local population; these institutions' administrators were among or connected to the *kalanha*. Because of these and other connections, the presidential campaign headquarters mainly approached the *kalanha* to mobilize vote banks.

However, the *kalanha* were divided in shifting and unpredictable ways, particularly along political party lines and mostly between the several branches of *Hezb-e Wahdat*. Some elders-politicians were cultivating new ties or reworking old ones with other presidential candidates (e.g. Zalmai Rassul). To achieve a consensus that would serve the interests of—and increase the benefits to—most of the *kalanha*, they divided the local electoral field into the lower, middle, and upper parts of the township in support of the three above- mentioned presidential candidates. This also increased the odds that the township would end up on the winning side of the elections. Some of the cultured youth, meanwhile, forged independent channels to engage with national politics in Kabul. Some, for example, coordinated with previous acquaintances in Kabul to contact Gul Agha Sherzai, another presidential candidate, through his first running mate, former MP Sayyed Hossain Alemi Balkhi.

The way local actors from Ayanda Township related to actors in national politics needs to be placed within the township's political context. From its beginnings in the early 1990s, when there were a handful of influential *kalanha* (e.g. Haidar and Hashem), Ayanda Township has gradually expanded, not only in terms of geographic area, but also in terms of the number and nature of its *kalanha* and other influential actors (in terms of ethnic and geographic belonging). This change in the nature of the township's elite has resulted in greater egalitarianism, political plurality, and democratic polyphony and performance. These were manifested in the variety of political alliances the township's actors were able to forge with national political actors.

Almost all local actors were largely financially motivated to participate in electoral campaign activities. The elders wanted to further enrich themselves socioeconomically. The cultured youth sought to recoup the costs of their

cultural centers and make some additional money. The petty youth gangsters used the elections as a pretext for engaging in funny prattle, making some money, and eating food. The girls and women were after money, too. However, there were concerns that went beyond sheer finance and economics. Most actors, particularly the elders and the women, assessed their situation very circumspectly, balancing their short- and long-term well-being in a province where they were engulfed and surrounded by people of other ethnic, religious, and political backgrounds (Sunni Tajiks and Pashtuns). They were therefore careful to support candidates that would not infuriate—and negatively affect their relationships with—the surrounding majority in the long run. In the words ofone CDC member:

> We are like the small stones that remain on the bed of a running stream. During the past 20 years or so, politicians have come and gone, but most ordinary people have stayed where they were. The politicians are the running water and the people are the small stones that remain underneath.24

The local actors, particularly the elders and the educated youth, were also very attentive to the regional and international dimensions of Afghanistan's 2014 presidential elections. This meant that they were constantly following rumored news and information about which countries in the region (particularly Iran and Pakistan) and which major powers involved in Afghani- stan (primarily the us) supported which presidential candidates. Certainly, the township's local actors did not want to end up on the losing side of the elections. There was, however, consensus among major local actors that the U.S. coalition's overthrow of the Taliban had improved their living conditions, since the Taliban had acted against their ethnicity and sub-religion, while post- Taliban Afghanistan had brought about greater ethnic and religious freedom, at least in this township. They also wanted a president that would enhance Afghanistan's relationships in the region and further afield. They saw bolstering Afghanistan's ties with neighboring Iran and Turkmenistan as particularly beneficial. As such, the ways in which the local electoral field was shaped and reshaped in this township were also framed in broader regional and international contexts.

24 Some were afraid that new threats such as *Da'esh* (Arabic for the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) would wash away even the "small stones that remain underneath." Local inhabitants, conversations with Said Reza Kazemi, Herat, December 2015.

Conclusion

Drawing on Afghanistan's 2014 simultaneous presidential and provincial council elections, this paper looked at the elections as the creation of a two-faceted field in a semi-urban area in Herat, western Afghanistan. Firstly, it investigated the elections as a discursive field, trying to figure out what the local people, given their historical and social contexts and socio-demographic statuses, said about the elections. Secondly, it examined the elections as a performative field, attempting to understand how the elections were practiced at a local level. The paper showed that how an election is framed in its discursive and performative dimensions needs to be situated in the wider historical and social contexts of a place. It also showed that in a place where there is greater freedom immediately following an oppressive era (namely that of the Taliban) and where there is equality between the elites and the ordinary people, the election is turned into a lively and unpredictable process where the discourse is marked by polyphony and instability and the performance is characterized by the mobilization of ties on various fronts and by shifting and unpredictable differentiation of local actors on political, generational, gender, and other grounds.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express sincere thanks to all the local people in Ayanda Township who welcomed me into their homes and neighborhoods before, during, and after the 2014 elections. I would also like to thank Dr. Sophie Roche, Leader of the Research Group "The Demographic Turn at the Junction of Cultures" at the Cluster of Excellence "Asia and Europe in a Global Context," for her continued encouragement and support. The paper benefited from the helpful comments of an anonymous reviewer. I am grateful to the Cluster of Excellence "Asia and Europe in a Global Context," financed by the German Research Council (DFG) between 2013 and 2017, for a doctoral scholarship that, among other things, allowed me to prepare this article.