

Review – Waiting for Dignity

Written by Abdul Ghani Amin

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ABDUL GHANI AMIN, AUG 16 2023

Waiting for Dignity: Legitimacy and Authority in Afghanistan

By Florian Weigand

Columbia University Press, 2022

In *Waiting for Dignity*, Florian Weigand offers a perceptive and stimulating analysis that illuminates the mechanisms of control and authority within a society plagued by ongoing political turmoil and conflict. Through meticulous research and rigorous analysis, Weigand offers a novel exploration of the difficulties of establishing a new system for governance concentrating on the period following the Taliban's ousting in 2001, examining the role of different groups in shaping Afghan society and politics. The author purports to offer three primary contributions, namely, a redefinition of legitimacy within the confines of conflict zones, the creation of a framework for scrutinising legitimacy in such settings, and an examination of the legitimacy of authority in Afghanistan.

Weigand's book offers a comprehensive analysis of the impact of personal experiences and power dynamics on individuals' perceptions of legitimacy. The author's insights are thought-provoking and shed light on the complex nature of this phenomenon. By means of a rigorous examination of Afghanistan's turbulent political terrain, Weigand reveals a society teeming with scepticism towards all forms of authority and their claims. The author presents a persuasive argument that individuals' evaluation of those in positions of authority is contingent upon their personal experiences, as well as their desire for demonstrations of deference and a yearning for interactions that exhibit a genuine commitment to public service, rather than personal gain.

Weigand's analysis precisely underscores the significance of legitimacy in the Afghan state's capacity to exercise authority and uphold stability. Based on his extensive research, the author identifies the significant factors that contribute to the establishment of legitimacy, which encompasses conventional power structures such as tribal leaders and religious figures. The author posits that community authorities possess a unique advantage in fostering legitimacy owing to their frequent interaction with the broader population, which engenders trust and credibility. Weigand emphasises the essential requirement for these authorities to follow equitable and courteous protocols to sustain their credibility. The author highlights the complex interplay between power, legitimacy, and stability in Afghanistan's convoluted socio-political landscape by exploring its intricate dynamics.

Although the book highlights the significance of certain individuals in Afghanistan who have acquired influence through financial support from Western sources, it fails to adequately discuss the substantial involvement of the donors in the establishment of parallel institutions. While the author emphasises the need for increased civic engagement, the absence of this issue is a significant drawback, as it fails to acknowledge the detrimental impact of these parallel institutions on the legitimacy of already malfunctioning institutions. The scholarly discourse, exemplified by the works of Ghani et al. (2006) and Murtazashvili (2022), sheds light on the detrimental effects of the donor community's creation of parallel institutions on the legitimacy and effectiveness of local governing bodies. The issue is exemplified by the establishment of provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) consisting of military officers, diplomats, and reconstruction subject matter experts, in collaboration with international non-governmental organisations and contractors. According to Murtazashvili (2022), the distribution, execution, and supervision of resources for Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) occurred without the participation or contribution of provincial and district authorities as well as civil society representatives. The absence of inclusion further undermined the

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credibility and efficacy of established institutions. Overlooking the parallel institutions established by the donor community in the book hinders a thorough understanding of this external factor and its impact on the legitimacy of authority in Afghanistan.

One of the notable strengths of this book is its rigorous fieldwork, which involved conducting 250 interviews with individuals of various backgrounds in four major cities, including the capital city of Kabul. As such, Weigand examines the complex fabric of Afghan society, revealing the diverse perspectives regarding the validity of different sources of power. In parallel, the author challenges prevailing assumptions regarding the establishment of legitimate governance in areas of conflict by giving prominence to the perspectives of influential figures, including powerbrokers, members of the Taliban, and individuals in positions of authority. Hence, Weigand provides insight into the complex characteristics of authority and emphasises the importance of 'interactive dignity' – a concept that encompasses fundamental principles such as impartiality, human dignity, and deference that influence individuals' interactions with others in positions of power.

The salient feature of the book is its focus on the wide-ranging viewpoints held by individuals concerning the validity of different sources of power, which elucidates that each source of power is endowed with a certain degree of legitimacy within specific segments of society. This observation is especially insightful as it acknowledges the complex and diverse perspectives regarding the legitimacy of authority. Hence, the book is enriched by a nuanced comprehension of the intricate dynamics of legitimacy. This understanding enables readers to comprehend the diverse weaving of perspectives that influence the socio-political landscape of the country.

Weigand's argument for a bottom-up approach to legitimacy is persuasive, as it challenges conventional notions that prioritise conventional actors and agencies. The author's astute observation draws attention to the regrettable disregard of Afghan viewpoints in both policy formulation and scholarly discourse, underscoring a significant omission, which the author mentions has little success. Weigand suggests an approach to tackle this matter, which entails the active engagement of the communities and the acknowledgment of traditional governance structures. The proposed approach seems viable, as it can involve the integration of local *jirgas*, *shuras*, community leaders, and representatives from civil society, including women and youth organisations. This strategy aims to surpass policy formulation and decision-making processes that were centred in Kabul or controlled by local elites and powerbrokers. This would facilitate the implementation of strategies that give precedence to the specific needs of the local community and conform to principles rooted in human rights. In view of this, Weigand's advocacy for an approach that is both inclusive and context-specific presents a valuable perspective that has the potential to reshape current approaches to legitimacy and facilitate the establishment of more responsive governance mechanisms.

The author's perspective on the constraints of a hierarchical strategy towards establishing credibility, constructing a functional state, and fostering peaceful conditions in Afghanistan offers valuable analytical depth. The book emphasises the potential of a hybrid approach that amalgamates elements and actors from both ends of the spectrum (Mac Ginty, 2010). The author proposes a nuanced perspective as a viable approach to tackle the complex challenges of legitimacy, peacebuilding, and state-building in Afghanistan. Although Weigand challenges the Weberian argument on the modern state, which is characterized by its rational-legal authority and bureaucratic organization, he by no means undermines the role of government in the process.

Weigand's primary contention regarding the perception of legitimacy among diverse stakeholders is a valuable contribution to comprehending the dynamics of legitimacy and authority. The author's assiduous investigation, subtle examination, and theoretical conclusions make a noteworthy contribution to the extant scholarship on Afghanistan. The book offers significant insights for policymakers, researchers, and individuals who aim to gain a more profound understanding of authority legitimacy in intricate settings by redirecting the emphasis from output-driven results to interaction modes and value-based anticipations. While the book offers valuable insights into the mechanisms of control and authority in Afghanistan, it may pose a challenge to readers, particularly policy makers or practitioners, who are not familiar with academic or technical terminology.

References

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About the author:

Abdul Ghani Amin has extensive expertise as a development practitioner, having accrued more than ten years of practical experience in the management of programs and projects in Afghanistan. Amin's main areas of expertise center on peacebuilding and state building. Amin has a Master's in Conflict, Security, and Development from the University of Sussex and is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Exeter, focusing on transnational engagement for conflict transformation and peacebuilding.