

Explaining the Effect of Tribal Structures on Political Decision-Making: A Case Study of Post-2001 Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how tribal structures as informal institutions affect the political decision-making process in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021. Tribal structures refer to social relations based on tribes, which bring together groups of people and help them influence social life. These structures are often referred to as Khan, Malik, Mashran, Jirga, and Shora in Afghan society. This study employs the informal institution theory as its theoretical framework. Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with two categories of participants (tribal structures and politicians). The study relies on secondary data sources such as books, journal articles, reports, policy documents, and websites for its theoretical foundations. The study finds that tribal structures have a considerable impact on shaping local and regional political decision-making through local kinship systems and community councils. In contrast, their influence on national-level political decision-making is limited due to a centralised institutional system, a clear decision-making process according to the constitution and external pressure. By examining Afghanistan's tribal structures, the article contributes to the broader international relations discourses on state-building, state legitimacy, and informal governance in weak and post-conflict states. Additionally, the findings are expected to raise awareness among politicians regarding the informal influence of tribal structures and their impact on political decision-making, thus contributing to both scholarly discourse and practical governance

INTRODUCTION

Joel S. Migdal, in *Strong societies and weak states: State-society relations and state capabilities in the third world*, argued that in the Third World, due to constrained social structures and societal heterogeneity, it is difficult for leaders to build a strong state. He defined strong states as those with the capacity to penetrate society, shape social relationships, extract resources, and use them in a determined way (Migdal, 1988). However, in the case of Afghanistan, the absence of a strong state undermines state-society relations in several ways. Nevertheless, despite inconsistencies over time, informal influences emerging from society in the form of societal tribal structures cannot be overlooked in the political decision-making process. These informal authorities, most of the time, have affected state policies and strategies (Miakhel, 2015).

The term tribal structure in this article refers to social relations based on tribes, which bring together groups of people and help them influence social life. These structures are often referred to

as Khan, Malik, Mashran, Jirga, and Shora in Afghan society. In international relations literature, the term is often used to refer to social structures, social bonds, and kinship structures. Evans Pritchard (1940), in his book *The Nuer*, used "social structure" only to refer to long-standing social groups such as nations, tribes, and clans. According to A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1940), the term social structure is not used to describe the social relations between two people but rather refers to a wide range of social networks involving many other people. He mentioned, for example, the kinship structure, which consists of father, mother, son, and so on. He then argued that social structures concern the existing relations at a given moment in time that link certain human beings (Brown, 1940).

Since 1747, when the Afghan state was founded by King Ahmad Shah Abdali, the tribal structure has played a significant role across time in installing and removing kings from power and shaping the social and political order. On the one hand, it was a source of resilience and unity against external political and cultural invasion. On the other hand, it was an obstacle to a moderate state (Miakhel, 2015). The process of modern state building in Afghanistan was initially shaped and gradually unfolded by the reigning King of Afghanistan at that time, Amir Shir Ali Khan, when he established a non-elective representative Jirga (council) and initiated the implementation of modern principles (Farahmand et al, 2023).

Political leaders in Afghanistan seek to maintain relationships with tribal elders. Even during the elections, the candidate focused on identifying and leveraging the informal influence these social structures hold to gain the presidency (Katzman, 2011). The existence of informal community-based governance, with significant power in the hands of Malik (community representatives), Mullah (religious arbiters), and some informally established Jirgas, shows that villages have considerable power in their own hands as they implement their basic ideas and goals. They could even provide public goods themselves, despite the constitution of Afghanistan (Mortazavi, 2014).

The Bonn Agreement in 2001 ended the uncertainty in Afghanistan's socio-political landscape. It led to the establishment of a new role, grounded in the country's 2004 constitution (Eslami, 2020). Despite a straightforward process and pattern for political decision-making, some decisions were challenged by informal social factors, particularly tribal structures. Moreover, decisions are made regarding a particular tribe or specific areas. Afghanistan serves as a unique case for this study where social structures have historically shaped both domestic and international politics. Unlike various states, Afghanistan's political landscape has been predominantly influenced by tribal councils and informal institutions, making it an ideal context to explain how these structures interact with formal state-building processes and international politics. In this research, political decision-making is conceptualised as a structured process of collective choices where individuals and organisations come together to shape public policies (Lau and Redlawsk, 2023).

Nevertheless, existing studies have explored ethnic politics in Afghanistan, described tribal and ethnic codes, and addressed informal governance. However, it has yet to systematically analyse how tribal structures, as informal authorities, influence the political decision-making process at the local, regional, and national levels, and how this influence has varied over the last 21 years. The study aims to address this gap through the lens of informal institution theory. Thus, this research hypothesises that tribal structures exert significant influence on political decision-making processes at the local, regional and national levels by competing, accommodating, substituting, or complementing the formal bodies of political decision-making.

Moreover, this study significantly contributes to the broader IR debate on governance, legitimacy and state-building in post-conflict societies and fragile states by examining the case of

tribal structures as informal government bodies in Afghanistan. These tribal structures, in the form of elder councils and informal Jirga, are not only domestic actors; they can also be considered informal power brokers whose impact extends into the scope of international politics, particularly when external interventions are expected (Farahmand, 2023). For instance, in Afghanistan, the Bonn Agreement (2001) and subsequent reconstruction efforts that sought to reshape Afghanistan's political order have shown how these tribal structures have played an important role in politics. This case highlights how informal power structures interact with both formal domestic and international actors, resulting in impactful governance outcomes. In this sense, the effect of tribal structures in the political decision-making process between 2001 and 2021 is studied as a critical case that illustrates the interplay between domestic social authority and global processes of intervention, negotiation, and legitimacy.

Additionally, this study serves as an important reference for future scholars, providing a framework for future research and extending knowledge in the field. It will enrich policymakers' understanding of how tribal influence varies across regions and how this variation affects the outcomes of government policies. Finally, the study underscores the need for the state-building struggle in Afghanistan to incorporate tribal power structures. Any attempt at reconstruction or reform that disrespects these truths risks refusal by local communities. In doing so, the research challenges Eurocentric models of state-building and instead supports contextually grounded approaches to Afghanistan's social and political realities.

RESEARCH METHOD

The study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the perspectives of two categories of informants. The first group comprises individuals from tribal structures (tribal leaders and members of local tribal councils), while the second group consists of politicians who participated in political decision-making between 2001 and 2021. This approach is preferred because it prioritises a deep understanding of the case over merely collecting numerical data and generalising. The use of semi-structured interviews enables the exploration of lived experiences, perceptions, and informal practices. These experiences, perceptions, and informal practices cannot be captured through quantitative surveys. Thus, a qualitative research design is particularly suitable for examining the influence of tribal structures on political decision-making.

A total of 20 participants were selected: ten from the first category and ten from the second. The informants were recruited through local contacts and convenience sampling. This technique enabled the researchers to access participants who were readily available and willing to contribute (Etikan et al., 2016). The researchers also incorporated elements of random selection within the selected categories to enhance the credibility and representativeness of the findings (Bryman, 2016). In this study, primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews enable researchers to go deeper into participants' experiences while keeping a reliable framework across interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). Secondary data, including books, journal articles, policy documents, official governmental and NGO reports, and several credible websites, were also used.

A content analysis technique was used to analyse the data. The responses were categorised into themes such as the role of tribal structures, variation in influence across time, policy implications, and legitimacy. This guaranteed the analytical rigour of the research findings. This methodological approach ensured that the study covered both ground realities and institutional standpoints. By

comparing these viewpoints, the research aimed to uncover truths and foster an inclusive understanding of the socio-political dynamics under investigation.

Literature Review

Although research on the role of tribal structures in Afghanistan's political decision-making remains limited, a body of work does reflect the theme of this research. Existing literature is grouped based on three main themes. First, the literature covering tribal codes such as *Pakhtunwali*; second, the studies addressing ethnic and identity politics; and third, the literature on federalism in Afghanistan. In a study published by the Pakhtunkhwa Research Centre (2007) under the theme *The importance of tribal structures and Pakhtunwali in Afghanistan: Their role in security and governance*, it shows how *Pakhtunwali* influences decision-making. The author argued that the *Pakhtun* Code of Conduct (the customary code regulating honour, hospitality, and dispute resolution) plays a strong role in Afghanistan's political landscape. They cited King Zahir Shah as an example. During his reign, the king relied on tribal elders to solve problems using the *Pakhtun* Code of Conduct in urban areas where government power was restricted. This differs from that of Miakhel's (2015). However, while Miakhel focused solely on *Pakhtunwali* and its influence on social life, our study explores the role of all tribes in the political decision-making process. From a theoretical point of view, Miakhel's study raises a broader debate about the status of the *Pakhtunwali* Code of Conduct: whether it is only regarded as a cultural tradition or can be traced as an informal institution that has a political effect. The current study emphasises the latter perspective on *Pakhtunwali* and argues that it has a significant impact on the political process in the country.

In a similar study, Mohammad Ikram Yawar and Ay Bik Muhsini (2024) in *The place of ethnic groups in the formation of Afghanistan's political structure and governance after 2001* focused on understanding ethnic-based politics in Afghanistan. They concluded that ethnic nationalism in Afghanistan led to an identity crisis. Their study also contributed to a wider debate on whether ethnic nationalism drives politics in Afghanistan. However, it did not highlight how tribal structures function as informal institutions in the political decision-making process.

Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili (2014), in her work *Informal federalism: Self-governance and power sharing in Afghanistan*, argued that despite the clear political roadmap for a centralised government, the political system appears to be an informal federalism. She argued that these customary organisations can provide many public goods and services. She further explained that, despite the absence of a formal district government, these customary institutions and representatives appointed by villagers themselves (*Malik*, *Khan*, and *Mullah*) do act as a local government and enhance the effectiveness of self-governance. As Murtazashvili did not directly address the role of the tribal structure in the political decision-making process, she clarified the role of *Malik*, *Khan*, and *Mullah* in the effectiveness of this informal government (Murtazashvili, 2014). This research is distinct from Murtazashvili work, which focused on a debate over the interaction between informal and formal institutions in Afghanistan. Our study directly examines how these tribal structures, which she identified as a factor enhancing the effectiveness of outcomes, influence the dynamics in the political decision-making process.

Ay Bik Muhsini, in *Historical study and analysis of the role of ethnic politics in the political structure of Afghanistan* (Contemporary Period), argued that ethnic politics shape the political structure in Afghanistan. As he claimed in his work, politics in Afghanistan has been based on ethnicity since the establishment of the country (Muhsini et al, 2024). Our study focuses on a different aspect of the matter compared to Muhsini's research and previous studies. It aims to

understand how different ethnic groups and tribes shape the outcome of the political decision-making process in Afghanistan, as well as the era. Muhsini highlighted the current government, but we chose to focus on the country's 21 years of democratic governance.

Mohiden Farmhand (2023), in *Ethnic struggles and political stability in Afghanistan 2001-2021: Thematic analysis of republican collapse*, examined the relationship between ethnic politics and political stability in Afghanistan. His study clarified the complex relationship between ethnic politics and political stability in Afghanistan, advancing knowledge of this significant period in the country's history. Farahmand's study offers a different perspective on Afghanistan's political status, which differs from this research. He focused on ethnic politics, while we are seeking to understand how different tribes, not just ethnic groups, affect the political decision-making process.

Collectively, this body of literature raises a few theoretical debates in state building in Afghanistan. The first debate concerns the status of tribal structures: whether they are a cultural tradition, institutional authority, or both. The second debate concerns ethnic nationalism and informal tribal influence; the third concerns formal and informal governance in Afghanistan. However, none of them addresses the status of tribal structures as informal authorities affecting the political decision-making process. The present study fills this gap and contributes to the existing literature in several ways. Different from Miakhel's (2015) work, this study broadens the scope of tribal structures beyond *Pakhtunwali* to include tribal structures of other ethnic groups in the country. The data was collected from different parts of Afghanistan to address the problem on a large scale. Moreover, this study shifts the lens beyond Farahmand's (2023) study, viewing tribal structures as political actors with a significant impact on political decision-making. Beyond academia, the study aims to help policymakers understand the influence of tribal structures by providing ground-reality-based data while designing public policies and making political decisions to align with social realities.

Theoretical Framework

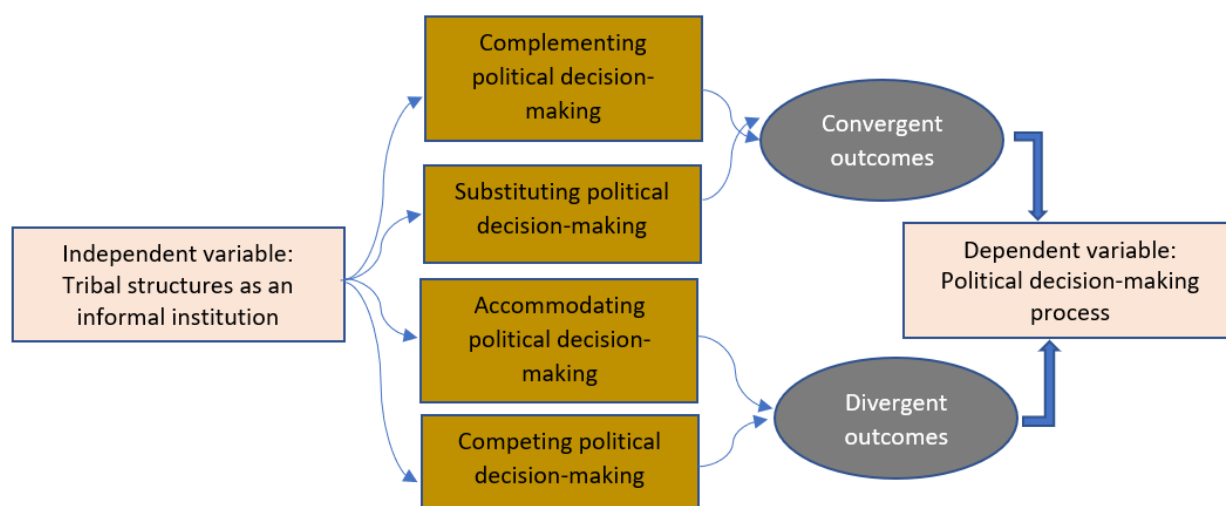
This study is grounded in informal institution theory. Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky (2004) developed this theory, arguing that, in many contexts, informal institutions shape political behaviour more strongly. They defined institutions as rules and procedures (both formal and informal) that structure actual social interactions by constraining and enabling actors' behaviour. They defined informal institutions as social roles, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside officially sanctioned channels. In contrast, formal institutions are rules and procedures created, communicated, and enforced through widely accepted official channels (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004). Helmke and Levitsky shaped a framework for formal-informal institution interaction based on four interaction patterns. Their arguments describe these four patterns of interaction (complementary, accommodating, competing, and substitutive). Sometimes these institutions complement formal institutions, leading to convergent outcomes; sometimes they accommodate, yielding divergent outcomes; sometimes they substitute for formal institutions, yielding convergent outcomes; and, at last, they compete, yielding divergent outcomes. (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004).

In the context of Afghanistan, tribal structures fit within the definition provided by Gretchen Helmke and Steven Levitsky. These structures are established through informal, unwritten rules that are communicated and enforced without any formal structure. They operate outside the government and still influence political behaviour. These tribal structures sometimes compete with, accommodate, complement, or substitute for formal institutions. For example, tribal structures like *Jirga* may inspire people to oppose the government's decision, invite people to accept it, compete with the government

and impose their own decision using soft power, or complement the decision that is supposed to be implemented by the government. The authors employed this theory in analysing the findings.

Based on the informal institution theory, the chain of causal mechanisms shows that the independent variable (tribal structures), by complementing or substituting for decisions taken by formal institutions (here referring to the bodies that take and implement political decisions), may result in convergent outcomes. Helmke and Levitsky's framework suggests that when informal institutions (such as tribal structures in this study) reinforce formal rules or substitute similar codes, it can lead to convergent outcomes, which may be beneficial or detrimental depending on the context. Conversely, when informal institutions oppose formal rules or divert behaviour from them, divergent outcomes arise that can also be either positive or negative, depending on the context.

Figure 1. Chain of Causal Mechanisms
Source: Authors' elaboration based on the theory



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings and Analysis

In this section, the first category refers to the respondents from tribal structures, while the second category refers to politician respondents. For security and ethical considerations, the names, locations, and other characteristics of the respondents are not clearly mentioned here.

Part one: This section presents the demographic information regarding the research sample. Table 1 displays the age group, experience, and gender of both participant categories, along with the locations from which these data were collected. As mentioned in the methodology section, ten participants were selected from each category. Thus, from each province of Afghanistan, two individuals were selected: one from category (A) and one from category (B).

Table 1. Details of the respondents
Source: processed by the authors

Category (A): Tribal elders	Category (B): Politicians
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Age group	Experience	Gender	Place of work	Age group	Experience	Gender	Place of work
38-57	More than 10 years	Male	Nangarhar, Kabul, Khost, Paktia, Zabul, Helmand, Badakhshan, Balkh, Bamiyan, and Kandahar	35-64	More than 10 years	Male	Nangarhar, Kabul, Khost, Paktia, Zabul, Helmand, Badakhshan, Balkh, Bamiyan, and Kandahar

Note: Table 1 is based on the data from the research. It only shows the demographic characteristics of the two categories of research participants.

Part two: This section presents the interviewees' responses to the primary research questions. The interview data was categorised into four parts: the role of tribal structures, the temporal shift in their impact, the policy implications of the tribal effect, and the role of these structures in the country's legitimacy.

Role of tribal structures

In this part, we asked the respondent, "How do tribal councils traditionally make decisions within your community? In what ways have tribal structures interacted with formal government institutions since 2001?" The data shows that in urban areas, tribal structures made decisions independently regarding several community issues. As one of the interviewees stated,

When something illegal happened, or a conflict occurred, these tribal elders would come together to find a solution for it. They would first try to solve the problem without involving the formal courts or governments. If the government intervened, they would collectively request the government to grant authority to these informal structures to solve the problem (Interview, 20 January 2026).

The same pattern of responses was apparent among seven respondents in the first category. They underscored that tribal elders were the primary source of conflict resolution; however, when informal mechanisms reached their limits in fulfilling this role, formal institutions engaged. The quoted response reflects a broader trend in the dataset. Two other respondents gave similar responses but, to some extent, explained the context of community issues. For instance, a respondent replied to the same question as follows: *"In some cases of serious crimes, the government disregarded the decision of tribal authorities."* This response also does not contradict the majority view but adds more explanation about the situation.

The data from the interviews reveals that when decisions were made concerning regions, such as a district or a large province, tribal elders, Mullah (religious leaders), and other influential figures in the area were formally invited to participate in the decision-making process and to share their insights and perspectives on these decisions. Additionally, tribal elders sometimes made decisions collectively and requested the government to implement them. For instance, many respondents noted, *"Tribal elders could change the chief of the district, police commanders, security directors, even the governor of the province"* (Interview, 23 January 2026).

The responses from the second category of respondents confirm that formal institutions required the cooperation of tribal structures when implementing decisions. As one respondent recalled,

On several occasions, we reached out to tribal leaders, Mullah, and other influential figures in the region to help us implement some policies. We urged them to motivate the people to accept what we were going to do. This was particularly more common during specific times, such as elections (Interview, 27 January 2026).

Another respondent from this category added,

We had specific formal structures within the provincial government that aimed to bring these local influential figures into our offices and to negotiate important issues with them. We continuously reached out to tribal leaders, Mullah, and other influential regional figures to assist us throughout decision-making and implementation processes (Interview, 2 February 2026).

However, data from the first category of respondents indicates that some decisions made at the national level or by government officials were implemented without the consensus of tribal elders. Respondents from different regions of the country recognised that certain decisions, especially those made by the central government, were implemented without regard to tribal elders. For instance, some tribal leader respondents stated, "We were not fully involved in the decision-making process; some decisions were directly implemented in our region. However, we sometimes participated in nationwide Jirga (councils) to share our insights on some important tasks and issues" (Interview, 23 January 2026). Collectively, data from interviews with respondents in both categories shows that tribal leaders received greater respect at the regional or provincial government level, where they were actively involved in many political decisions. However, in nationwide tribal structures, community leaders were less involved than in regional areas.

Table 2. Responses about the research question
Source: processed by the authors

Sections (based on research questions)	Responses from the first category		Responses from the second category	
	Positive answers	Negative answers	Positive answers	Negative answers
Role of tribal structures	8	2	7	3

Note: Table 2 is based on the data from the research. It only shows the demographic characteristics of the two categories of research participants.

The "negative answers" in Table 2 suggest that tribal structures were often invited into the decision-making process. However, this inclusion was frequently a mere gesture of respect, as the government had typically already made its decisions. One respondent from the second category explained, "Decisions were already made. To gain support, we called for tribal elders to share their thoughts, and when we did this, they were happier with the government" (Interview, 19 January 2026). Nevertheless, this response pattern was not consistently observed among respondents; however, it corresponds to the accommodating pattern in Levitsky's framework, where formal and informal institutions work together. Furthermore, this case illustrates that formal institutions utilise informal authorities to legitimise decisions, reducing their role to a symbolic position instead of being a substantive authoritative body.

In a few other questions, we asked respondents whether the tribal structures compete, accommodate, substitute for, or complement the decisions made by the government. The responses are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Summary of responses about four outcomes
Source: processed by the authors

Respondent Category	Compete with the government	Accommodate the government	Substitute the government	Complement the government
Category (A)	0	7	0	3
Category (B)	2	5	1	4

Note: Table 3 is based on the data from the research. It only shows the demographic characteristics of the two categories of research participants.

The data in Table 3 shows that tribal structures accommodated and complemented the decisions made by the government. However, an important point that emerges from this complementarity and accommodation is, as some respondents stated, *"These tribal structures were not in any position at all to compete with or substitute for the decisions made by the government"* (Interview, 24 January 2026). Additionally, one of the respondents mentioned that

The tribal elders had an impact in both complementing and accommodating decisions. However, when tribal structures rejected certain decisions, the government engaged with these community leaders and persuaded them to accept the decisions. As the elders found personal benefits and recognised their influence within society, they ultimately complemented the decisions made by state institutions (Interview, 2 February 2026).

Additionally, the data suggests that tribal elders had a significant impact on political decision-making at the regional and local levels, but little impact at the national level. They also complemented and supported the government's decisions and had no chance of competing with or substituting for them.

Temporal shift in tribal influence

As this study covers the period between 2001 and 2021, we asked our respondents to share their thoughts on three distinct phases of government in Afghanistan: the Transitional Government, the two terms served by President Hamid Karzai, and the two terms under President Ashraf Ghani. The interview data demonstrate that during the first two phases which includes the Transitional Government, First round of Hamid Karzai government from 2004-2009 and his second round 2009-2014) of the government, tribal leaders' involvement in political decision-making was greater than in the last two rounds. Over the years, the role of the tribal elders has been undermined by the government. As a respondent reported, *"In the time of President Hamid Karzai, there were different councils active at local, regional, and even national levels. He gave much respect to the ideas of community leaders and Spingere"* (Spingere means the old people influence the community) (Interview, 1 February 2026). Table 4 shows the given answers to the question: How has the role of tribal structures in political decision-making changed between 2001 and 2021?

Table 4. Temporal shift of tribal structures role
Source: processed by the authors

Phase of the government	Transitional Government 2001-2002			Hamid Karzai government 2002-2014			Mohamad Ashraf Gahin 2014-2021		
Responses about the effect of tribal structures	Less role	No role	More role	Less role	No role	More role	Less role	No role	More role
	0	10	0	2	1	7	6	2	2

During the Transitional Government phase, as the government emerged from the Bonn Agreement, the role of tribal structures was not evident. All respondents agreed that tribal structures were inactive during this phase of the government. The majority of respondents from both categories agreed that, in the period between 2002 and 2014, the tribal structures played a significant role in the political decision-making process, compared to the period between 2014 and 2021.

Policy implication

In this section, we sought responses on two main issues: How these tribal structures shaped policies (positively or negatively) and what lessons can be drawn for future governance from their roles. The majority of the respondents viewed the role of tribal structures in a positive sense, as one of the respondents argued, "*Tribal elders understand the society better and know how to make decisions about a particular region, so they have played a positive role in the political decision-making process*" (Interview, 17 January 2026). Table 5 shows the responses to the first question posed in this section.

Table 5. Responses to the first question
Source: data provided by the participants

Question	Answers from Category (A)			Answers from Category (B)		
	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Negative	Neutral
How did these tribal structures shape policies (positively or negatively)?	7	2	1	6	3	1

In response to the second question in this section, respondents emphasised that the involvement of tribal elders, Mullah, and various community segments is crucial for understanding reality and making informed decisions based on the community's actual circumstances. They also argued that this group's role is critical in state-society relations. These elders can direct their community members to accept the government and to comply with the laws and regulations. They further noted that this group has greater informal power stemming from their social status. Therefore, the state and government need to engage with them and gain control of all the areas.

Legitimacy and tribal structures

The answers confirm that tribal structures have played a vital role in the legitimacy of Afghan governance. Respondents highlighted that tribal elders and other community influencers hold informal authority derived from their social and cultural status. This soft power enables them to mediate disputes, mobilise societies, and shape public acceptance of government policies. In many cases, their involvement is seen as essential for bridging the gap between state institutions and local populations. As one respondent noted, "*Tribal elders understand the society better and know how to make decisions about a particular region, so they have played a positive role in the political decision-making process*" (Interview, 17 January 2026). The interview respondents indicated that in Afghanistan, if the government does not respect tribal structures, religious authority within society, and its influence over people, it cannot remain for long and will face resistance, as Afghanistan's history has witnessed several times.

Furthermore, these structures have sustained social solidarity during times of political uncertainty by reinforcing trust between citizens and the state. This means these structures can use their power to motivate the community to support formal institutions when needed. They can also serve a bridging role, contribute to legitimacy, and provide a stabilising function in society. One of the respondents stated, "*Ashraf Ghani's government was not successful because he did not pay more attention to tribal elders and was focusing too much on institutionalising. He brought some positive changes but did not involve the tribe in the decision-making process*" (Interview, 23 January 2026). This indicates that if the government does not care about these informal structures, it will negatively affect the government's longevity and effectiveness.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning here that this study faces several limitations. Firstly, the absence of women respondents resulted in a sample that only represents male perspectives. This prevented the study from capturing women's perspectives on how tribal structures affected political decision-making processes between 2001 and 2021. Secondly, although qualitative research can provide an in-depth understanding, this research is limited to a small number of respondents (20 from both categories), which limits its generalizability. Thirdly, the security situation in Afghanistan brought two kinds of limitations. On the one hand, it restricted the researchers from using random sampling techniques and forced them to rely on convenience sampling. On the other hand, this situation might have affected the respondents' ability to provide genuine responses due to their personal circumstances.

Discussion

The findings do not fully support the research hypothesis. The findings show that tribal structures and many community influencers (called Spingere and Mashran in Afghanistan) had limited influence in national-level political decision-making. The reasons behind this limitation were, on the one hand, the centralised institutions, constitutional restrictions and, more importantly, the involvement of international actors at different levels of the decision-making process. On the other hand, the influence of these tribal structures was itself limited to the local and often regional level.

All these factors restricted tribal structures' ability to compete with or substitute for the decisions made by formal institutions and, most of the time, led to convergent outcomes. However, the data indicates that these structures played a significant role in political decision-making at the regional and local levels for several reasons. First, these authorities derived their influence from community trust and kinship, which enabled them to be more involved in people's daily lives than formal institutions. Second, dispute resolution through informal institutions at the local level was easier, cheaper, and generally accepted according to cultural codes such as Pakhtunwali. Third, formal institutions had more bureaucratic procedures, making them more difficult for local people to access.

Furthermore, the study found that in Afghan society, these informal, powerful structures held a strong position within their communities and could therefore be understood as indispensable informal mechanisms that complemented and reinforced formal governance structures. The findings also show that the role of tribal elders and tribal structures in general was more prominent during the 2002–2014 period but declined during the 2014–2021 period. This shift indicates that when the government overlooked the role of these powerful structures, it inevitably encountered societal issues that challenged the effectiveness of the state and its governance. However, despite their strong influence, these tribal structures lacked the institutional capacity to compete with or substitute for state decisions or to exert influence at the national, regional, and local levels.

To directly address the research question based on our findings from first-hand data, we assert that tribal elders, councils (such as jirga and shura), and community leaders (referred to as Spingere and Mashran) played a crucial role in dispute resolution in Afghan society. They served as mediators, mobilised communities, and influenced regional and local appointments of officials and policies. Their power was rooted in social legitimacy, which enabled them to fill the gap between formal institutions and society. They complemented and supported formal institutions in initiating and implementing political decisions within society, although they were somewhat marginalised in the nationwide political decision-making process.

The centralised government was a significant factor in marginalising tribal structures from the national decision-making process. The 2004 Constitution outlined the processes and authorities of each branch of government in the decision-making process. However, it did not explicitly define the role of tribal leaders and community councils. Sayed Reza Hussaini (2022) argued that the constitutional design established in Afghanistan in 2004 was a primary reason for the country's political tragedy. He pointed out that while the Constitution acknowledged the principle of the separation of powers, it disproportionately empowered the executive branch. For instance, the president not only appointed central-level officials but also had the authority to appoint provincial officials (Hussaini, 2022). This also restricted informal authorities from playing a significant role in the national decision-making process.

Moreover, Thomas Ruttig (2014), in his work *Prologue: A study of international engagement in Afghanistan in the period 2001-2014*, explained the sidelining of civil society in the Bonn Agreement and afterwards. This paralyses the marginalisation of tribal structures. In both instances, actors are utilised to gain legitimacy while being denied formal authority. The 2004 constitutional design institutionalised this marginalisation. Tribal elders and civil society activists were indirectly excluded from the formal decision-making process both at the national and local levels. However, the informal influence these tribal structures had on local and regional areas gave them a chance to influence the decision-making process.

International intervention and donor-driven governance were identified as other factors undermining the role of tribal structures in national-level decision-making processes. Implementing these policies and decisions required the commitment of tribal leaders in local areas, which increased the role of tribal elders at the regional and local levels. The security environment increasingly highlighted the role of community leaders in local government. Insurgency in rural areas complicated the central government's ability to implement decisions and required the complementary and accommodative role of tribal structures. Nevertheless, cultural legitimacy required the involvement of these actors in decision-making at the local and regional levels. Additionally, the findings show that due to more centralisation after 2014, the role of these structures was diminished. The government paid less attention to local councils than it did in early 2014. This shift affected the government's status in some local areas. Furthermore, this division between urban and rural areas impacted the stability of state and formal institutions from 2014 to 2021.

We applied the four main assumptions of informal institution theory, which state that informal institutions can complement, accommodate, substitute, or compete with formal institutions. For each assumption, we asked respondents independently whether they could give an example where a decision from formal institutions was complemented, accommodated, substituted for, or challenged by its informal counterparts. From both categories of respondents, we did not find any prominent example of substitution or competition with formal institutions. However, we found that the majority of formal institutions' decisions were complemented and accommodated by tribal structures. For

instance, respondents mentioned the controversy over the inclusion of “Afghan” identity in their National Identity Card (Tazkira/NIC). This controversy stemmed from a government decision to include “Afghan” as a national identity for all citizens of Afghanistan, which was contested by minorities in the country. The minorities argued that the word “Afghan” refers to the Pakhtun ethnic group and its inclusion would indicate the dominance of this ethnic group and the exclusion of other ethnic identities. Some minority groups opposed the decision made by official bodies, but their resistance was largely ineffective. Various tribal structures across Afghanistan encouraged people to obtain identity cards, proudly labelling their national identity as “Afghan.” This support ultimately helped the government implement the policy.

Another example given by a respondent was about the DDR (Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration) policy, which was a peacebuilding act after the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Many tribal leaders and combatants who possessed weapons refused to surrender them to the government. However, formal institutions received support from the majority of tribal leaders to collect weapons from the combatants and those who rejected the government's directions. Finally, while Levitsky's (2004) informal institution theory assumes that informal institutions can compete with and substitute for formal institutions, evidence from this post-conflict centralised Afghan state implies that these informal institutions are structurally constrained. Even though they accommodated and complemented formal institutions at the regional and local levels to some extent, their role in the national-level decision-making process was limited and largely symbolic. The theoretical contribution of this study is that it demonstrates that, in non-Western, post-conflict societies, these informal institutions should not be understood as alternative sources to formal institutions but as a mediating force that sustains state legitimacy at the local level while being marginalised at the national level.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to explore the role of tribal structures in the political decision-making process in Afghanistan using informal institution theory. The authors contend that these informal institutions have a significant impact on political decisions. The data shows that tribal structures complemented and accommodated formal institutions in regional areas, but they did not have a significant impact on the national decision-making process. The role of these informal institutions was stronger between 2001 and 2014 but gradually diminished from 2014 to 2021. For future research, it would be beneficial to explore how the gap between regional and national levels of impact in tribal structures can be integrated. This is essential for both the legitimacy of the government and the effectiveness of the decisions. Research on political decisions is also necessary to understand how tribal leaders respond to specific strategies and policies in a given time and region. Additionally, comparative studies on the role of tribal structures in different countries can further provide valuable insights for policymakers to bridge formal and informal institutions. It is essential to investigate the role of these groups in the current political status quo, analyse how the current government interacts with tribal and community leaders, and explore their impact on the decision-making process. Minimising local, regional, and national gaps between formal and informal institutions can boost the legitimacy and effectiveness of political decisions. The conclusion drawn from this article can be meaningful for state actors and policymakers, allowing them to reflect on and assess their strategies before undertaking new initiatives. By examining how previous governments engaged with the informal yet powerful authority of tribal groups, the article offers insight into the challenges and opportunities inherent to governance in Afghanistan's unique sociopolitical landscape.

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