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The Vicious Cycle of Political Instability and Developmental Failure in Afghanistan: Ethnic Divisions, External Dependency, and the Legitimacy Crisis

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

Afghanistan, strategically located at the crossroads of Central Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East, has been shaped by complex internal dynamics and frequent external interventions, resulting in chronic political instability and developmental failure. Despite its rich history, spanning ancient empires like the Achaemenids and modern reform efforts, Afghanistan has faced persistent challenges in achieving sustainable development. From Amanullah Khan's modernization reforms in 1919, which aimed to transition from a tribal society to a modern state, to Mohammad Zahir Shah's five-year plans in the 1960s focusing on industrialization, and the post-2001 National Development Strategy (ANDS) that fostered infrastructure and civil Society, these initiatives have been disrupted by over

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12 major regime changes in the past century, averaging one every eight years. This study examines how ethnic divisions, external dependency, and legitimacy crises form a vicious cycle of political instability and developmental failure in Afghanistan. The research addresses the question: How do ethnic cleavages (e.g., tensions among Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks rooted in tribal structures), external dependency (e.g., reliance on foreign aid and geopolitical interventions), and legitimacy crises (e.g., lack of democratic governance and ethnic discrimination) contribute to this cycle? The significance lies in understanding internal challenges like chronic poverty (42% below the poverty line in 2025), social fragmentation (75% livelihood insecurity), and human rights violations (e.g., suppression of women's education), as well as regional implications, such as the potential for instability to fuel terrorism and destabilize Central Asia.

Methodology

This research employs a descriptive-analytical approach to elucidate the causal relationships between political instability and developmental failure, drawing on the theoretical frameworks of David Saunders (1980) on political instability and Adrian Leftwich (2000) on developmental states. Data were collected from library sources, including historical texts (e.g., Ghobar, 1999; Farhang, 2006), official documents (e.g., 1964 Constitution, communist decrees, ANDS), contemporary reports up to September 2025 (e.g., World Bank, UNDP, HRW), and scholarly articles (e.g., Sattari et al., 2018). The analysis is qualitative, focusing on causal relationships (e.g., coups disrupting development programs) and historical comparisons (1919–2021) with 2025 data to demonstrate the persistence of the instability cycle. The methodology integrates Saunders' models of instability (peaceful/violent challenges, governance/regime changes) and Leftwich's criteria for developmental states (legitimacy, democratic adherence, ethnic management) to analyze how ethnic cleavages, external dependency, and legitimacy crises interact systemically to hinder development.

Results

The findings reveal that Afghanistan's developmental efforts have been consistently undermined by a cycle of political instability driven by three key factors.

First, ethnic cleavages (Saunders' structural differentiation) have fueled tensions, with Pashtun dominance marginalizing groups like Hazaras, leading to armed conflicts (e.g., Daesh attacks in 2024–2025) and social fragmentation. Second, external dependency (Saunders' dependency index) has rendered the economy fragile, with 97% of GDP reliant on foreign aid in 2011 and a 40% trade deficit in 2025, while geopolitical interventions (e.g., Soviet invasion, Pakistan's support for the Taliban) have exacerbated instability. Third, legitimacy crises (Leftwich's non-developmental state traits) stem from undemocratic practices (e.g., Taliban's suppression of women's education since 2021) and ethnic favoritism, eroding public trust and participation. Historical analysis shows that Amanullah's reforms (1919–1929) failed due to tribal revolts, Zahir Shah's plans (1964–1973) were halted by a coup, and the post-2001 ANDS collapsed due to Taliban insurgency and corruption. Current data (September 2025) confirm the cycle's persistence: a 2.2% economic growth forecast, HDI of 0.496 (181/193 globally), 14.8 million facing food insecurity, and ongoing human rights abuses. These factors interact in a feedback loop, where ethnic tensions invite foreign intervention, dependency undermines legitimacy, and legitimacy crises deepen social divides, stalling development.

Conclusion

Afghanistan's persistent political instability and developmental failure are rooted in a systemic cycle of ethnic cleavages, external dependency, and legitimacy crises. The evidence confirms the hypothesis that political instability—driven by wars, coups, revolutions, foreign interventions, and social inequalities—has disrupted 85–90% of development initiatives, from Amanullah's reforms to the ANDS. Breaking this cycle requires structural reforms: an inclusive ethnic council to rebuild legitimacy, domestic investment to reduce dependency, and education to foster unity. Without these, Afghanistan's economic (2.2% growth), social (75% livelihood insecurity), and political (gender and ethnic suppression) challenges will persist, threatening regional stability. With its vast potential (e.g., mineral resources, 60% youth population), Afghanistan can transition to a developmental state through collective will and conditional international support, fostering a unified, prosperous future.

Key words: Political instability, developmental failure, ethnic cleavages, external dependency, legitimacy crisis, Afghanistan.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in conducting this research study.