

**PRIVATE WORKSHOP ON AFGHANISTAN**  
**19 November 2001**  
**Princeton University**

**Workshop Summary**

An important step in developing a roadmap towards a decentralized Afghanistan was taken recently at Princeton University where a private workshop on Afghanistan took place. The event was organized by the Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination (LISD) at Princeton University together with the Foundation for Central Asia Development. This meeting assembled Afghan experts from the region and Europe as well as academics who discussed ways and means of applying the notion of decentralization to Afghanistan. A wider follow-up meeting is envisaged for the near future which will bring together experts and leading personalities from Afghanistan to further develop the mechanics of a decentralized power structure in Afghanistan and thus develop the details of a sustainable political framework.

After Bonn

The Bonn meeting under the auspices of the United Nations has made a first step towards a peaceful future for Afghanistan. What is needed after Bonn, is a clear legal and political framework that addresses the local and regional political structure and institutions, as well as contributes to the constitutional process as stipulated by the Bonn Agreement.

The international community has a clear understanding of what is at stake in Afghanistan. If the issues that have driven over twenty years of internal armed conflict are not tackled, there is a great risk of Afghanistan falling back into ethnic strife, internal armed conflict, and stalled economic development. This would lead to the continued victimization of a civilian population which has suffered incredible hardship in the recent past, but would also pose an enormous risk for the stability of the region and international security.

There exists a strong international consensus supporting an “Afghan solution” to the on-going crisis: Massive political and financial support from the international community is required, but there is also a broad agreement that the structure of government has to be determined by the Afghan people themselves. There is an understanding of the need for a long-term sustainable political solution that addresses both the state structure and the role of central, regional, and local authority.

Decentralization

The best way to alleviate competition and prevent a fight over central power in Afghanistan is by establishing a decentralized structure which empowers regional and local entities within the country. Central authority would be focused on and limited to core ministries, including defense, economics, foreign affairs, and a Supreme Court.

In order to create a post-Taliban Afghanistan which is both viable for the Afghan people and a factor of stability in the region, a structure needs to be established that truly reflects the diversity of this multi-ethnic society and preserves the distinct characteristics of all ethnic groups and communities.

The recent past makes it clear that regional entities can function in Afghanistan. Decentralization can further make use of and build upon traditional power structures in Afghanistan and thus be compatible with the call for an “Afghan solution.” While the country as a whole has been immersed in chaos for much of the past two decades, local and community structures have continued to be functional and operational. At the district and village level, there are councils which are convened to deal with issues such as water rights or land disputes. A long-term political solution must make use of the functioning structures in place.

Furthermore, decentralization would also be based on the realities on the ground: Regional entities already have and continue to establish themselves. Authority given to such regional entities on issues such as taxation, education, etc. would provide an incentive for them to cooperate with the central authority instead of ignoring its existence. By the same token, it would also contribute to the preservation of the territorial integrity of the country. Decentralization could be established alongside with a declaration of permanent neutrality which further contributes to preserving the territorial integrity of the country.

A decentralized structure would not only be a means to prevent a repetition of the pattern of the past, but also provide a solid framework for making Afghan society truly inclusive and fully participatory. It would furthermore greatly facilitate the efforts regarding relief, recovery, and in particular reconstruction of the country. Channeling funds through a central authority in Afghanistan has in the past invariably led to a grossly uneven distribution of the means available.

### Lessons Learned

In the past, all important decisions on provincial and district levels were taken or controlled by the central authority in Kabul. The striving for ethnic domination was hidden in the language of national unity and of a modernizing state. While the constitution contained safeguards for the interests of ethnic minority groups, these provisions were not implemented and thus meaningless in practice. Discrimination against ethnic minority groups in areas such as education, language, and others was a constant pattern. The Taliban regime was but the last and most extreme example of ethnic domination, serving as a scaffolding upon which the religious extremism of the Taliban and their outside supporters was built.

Different as all the previous mediation efforts in Afghanistan were, they had one important common feature: They all focused on some formula of a broad-based government and representation of all ethnic groups. They did not, however, address the deeper structural inequalities and social dynamics that have emerged over the past thirty years. A long-term and sustainable political solution to the crisis in Afghanistan is only possible, if these underlying issues are addressed. All attempts to establish a political formula solely through a central authority have only led to ethnic domination and fight for control. Mediation efforts based on power-sharing formulas failed because notions of ethnic and community identity had become too strong and central authority therefore deeply distrusted. A new approach is therefore needed.

Behind the various conflicts for power, behind the competing ideologies in Afghanistan is a society without a structure capable of reflecting its diversity, actively disempowering its heterogeneity, and incapable of perceiving its diversity as an asset and of preserving it. This structural problem must be addressed through a long-term process of building trust and relationships between the various communities and through the empowerment of the regional and local levels.