

Local Responses to Authoritarianism Under the Taliban Emirate

By Michael Semple

Michael Semple is a professor at Queen's University Belfast, and has worked with the UN and EU in Afghanistan and Pakistan. His research on armed conflict and peace includes investigation of the political culture of the Taliban Movement and analysis of political and civil rights in South Asia. He co-presents the podcast Taliban Turbans and Smart Phones.

Abstract

This chapter explores the local responses to the re-establishment of the Islamic Emirate in August 2021, focusing on Zurmat District in Paktia Province in Afghanistan. Using personal notes, published sources, and detailed interviews with local key informants, the chapter examines how community representatives engaged with leaders from the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in a tightly controlled political environment. The main argument is that, despite severe constraints, local actors managed to retain some political space through non-confrontational rhetoric and practical community mobilization. The chapter concludes that while Zurmat's local politics operated under significant restrictions, these actors could still influence local governance to some extent. For meaningful national political dialogue, strategies must ensure non-Taliban participants are free from these constraints.

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Introduction

The Taliban's capture of Afghanistan's capital on 15 August 2021 abruptly ended the Islamic Republic and halted efforts to establish democracy and pluralism in the country. A one-party regime was imposed, in which past service to the Taliban's jihad was required for anyone to hold any position of authority. A Council of Ministers was formed from the commanders of that jihad. The Taliban's Amir, or supreme leader, asserted a divine right to rule by decree, thus rejecting the notion of legitimacy derived from popular consent. Tight media controls ended free speech and the Taliban rapidly deployed repressive apparatus to deter dissent. Political activity at the national level became impossible. Elected representatives and the rest of the Republic-era political class either fled the country or silenced themselves (Abbas, 2023). And within this authoritarian approach, the Taliban aggressively pursued a cultural policy in which society was purged of supposed contamination by secular Western ideas and their vision of an Islamic order was imposed.

The Taliban asserted their monopoly on power at both the local and national level so that even at the lowest levels of administration, only Taliban could serve as officials. But when it came to the practicalities of governing Afghanistan, they found that, at the local level, they had to concede at least some space to figures who could articulate their communities' concerns and mediate between administration and the population. Across the country, local Afghan actors had to digest and respond to the Taliban's proclaimed mission of cultural transformation. And they had to discover a new rulebook of how to do politics and to represent their communities under the conditions of Taliban authoritarianism.

This chapter describes how local politics were reshaped in the district of Zurmat, Paktia Province, under the new authoritarianism. It is based on a mix of personal notes and published sources. In the years immediately following the 2001 Bonn Accord, the author served as a United Nations political officer and European Union diplomat, supporting the establishment of the Afghan Republic and efforts at post-conflict reconciliation. In this capacity, and subsequently as a university researcher, I made successive visits to Zurmat and the provincial capital Gardez over a twenty-year period. I made the acquaintance of community leaders, government officials and members of the Taliban active in Zurmat and accumulated contextual knowledge of the district. The observations contained in this article draw on detailed notes of interviews, conducted remotely, to

chronicle developments in Zurmat, with key informants having first-hand knowledge of the developments following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, a period in which fieldwork would have been inappropriate. In line with research ethics, the identities of interviewees are withheld and an alias is used for the principal community leader referred to in the narrative. The primary material is triangulated and supplemented by published sources where available.

The chapter starts with a historical context of Taliban rule in Zurmat through an account of a visit by Taliban VIPs in 2022. Thereafter, an account of community mobilization in 2022 is offered, focusing on four issues important for the youth in Zurmat under Emirate rule: taxation, employment, education and local autonomy. This part of the chapter also touches upon the community response to the appointment of a new Paktia provincial governor in 2022, the controversy around Emirate restrictions on the operation of girls' schools, an account of increased control and surveillance by the Taliban in local districts, and a summary of points of criticism of the Emirate rule, as seen from the perspective of organized young people in Zurmat. The chapter ends with some reflections on the possibilities of politics on the local level in Zurmat and, more generally, under the Emirate version of authoritarian rule.

The Historical Context of Taliban Rule in Zurmat

A few days before the first anniversary of the 2021 Taliban capture of Kabul, a convoy of vehicles delivered Taliban VIPs to a walled compound deep in the Paktia countryside. There they were joined by a crowd of local tribesmen and their designated elders. The gathering was steeped in historic and political significance.

The mausoleum of Mawlvi Nasrullah Mansoor in the Sahak sub-district of Zurmat is a building which embodies many of the contested themes in the politics of south-eastern Afghanistan. The structure consists of a domed chamber built spaciously around Mansoor's grave. The layout is deliberately similar to that of countless shrines to historic sufi saints, spiritual figures whose blessings contemporary pilgrims still seek. And adjoining the tomb chamber is a long hall filled with rows of low desks, where local boys memorize the Qur'an, and some embark on higher religious studies.

The conservative Sunni religious scholars of Zurmat were among

the first to agitate against the British-backed puppet king Shah Shuja in September 1841, provoking a British expedition to the district, before the main Afghan uprising in Kabul began (Kaye, 2022, p. 613). Nasrullah Mansoor revived this tradition of clerical activism by leading one of the earliest revolts against communist rule in 1978 and going on to become one of the first leaders of the anti-Soviet mujahideen to mobilize religious students, Taliban, as a force. Mansoor, by then leading his own faction of the party *Harakat Inqilab*, was the dominant force in Zurmat by the time of the 1992 collapse of the government led by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan. Followers of Mansoor were awarded several key positions in the mujahideen administration of Paktia Province and Zurmat district (Younas, 1997). But their position was contested, and in 1993 Mansoor became the senior-most mujahideen figure killed in the conflict, when *Hizb-e-Islami* (*Hizb*) targeted his Landcruiser with an IED. Under pressure from *Hizb* in the factional conflict, Mansoor's lieutenants became the first major players from Paktia to travel to Kandahar and affiliate with the new madrassah-linked movement which had emerged there: the Taliban (Maley, 1998).

The consequences of this early alliance are still felt today as Mansoor-linked Zurmatīs went on to become the largest non-Kandahari bloc in the Taliban leadership and Emirate administration: Water and Power Minister Latif Mansoor is Mansoor's nephew; Amir Khan Motaqi, the Foreign Minister, is another Mansoori Zurmati. (UN, 2024).

Zurmat is predominantly Pashto-speaking and, in keeping with Paktia and much of south-eastern Afghanistan, local tribal institutions retain much social influence. On top of its historical legacy, control of Zurmat is important in Afghan power politics on account of its geography. The district consists of a central valley bounded by highlands to the north-west and south-east. The valley's flood plain, where the district administrative centre is located, supports productive irrigated agriculture and a large rural population. With over 110,000 inhabitants, Zurmat is the most populous district in Paktia (World Bank, 2019). The highlands are home to remote communities. Generations of rebels against the central power have availed themselves of the natural defences in the mountains. A force ensconced in Zurmat's south-eastern highlands can potentially threaten the strategic Kabul–Gardez–Khost highway. And the proximity of the border with Pakistan's Waziristan (60 km from central Zurmat) has ensured that any rebel group operating from Pakistan has a short supply line.

During the years of the Afghan Republic (2001–2021), Zurmat was split in at least two ways. In 2002, the sub-district of Shahikot in Zurmat's south-eastern highlands was the site of the last big battle between U.S. forces and the rump of the Taliban-Al Qaeda alliance (Naylor, 2005). And as the insurgency developed, Shahikot was one of the first areas where Taliban established bases and a permanent presence. The republican government held the district centre and maintained a tenuous grip over the strategic east-west highway traversing the district until the conflict's final stages. But over the years, supported by the Taliban's eastern military commission in Peshawar, the Mansoor network mobilized armed groups under the Taliban banner in Zurmat, incrementally expanding their influence over rural areas (Foschini, 2015; Ruttig, 2019; Ruttig and Sayed Sadat, 2021).

Much of the original support for the Mansoor network came from Zurmat landed interests – kulaks owning walled orchards and mud forts, who were the original adherents of local clerics such as Mansoor. Such figures played a deft balancing act in the next phase of the conflict. A baby boom in the years after the 1992 victory meant that during the Republic, former mujahideen commanders had young families, well placed to take advantage of the educational and employment opportunities. In occasional visits to Paktia and Zurmat during the insurgency and while tracking the conflict up to 2021, I observed how agrarian relations and competing clerical and tribal networks underpinned the war in Zurmat. Throughout the insurgency, Zurmat's kulaks sent their offspring to university, engaged with the republican authorities on behalf of their tribe and hosted Taliban fighters in their guest rooms. In their balancing act, leading kulaks kept open channels of communication to government and insurgents alike. They tried to minimize the risks of open conflict in the area by persuading all sides that the tribal elders could take care of their concerns without the need for fighting.

The insurgency also provided a space within which network contests played out. Zurmat's relatively prosperous agrarian economy presented multiple opportunities for insurgent groups, in control of territory and roads to capture revenues. Potential revenue sources included local agricultural production, government transfers, contractors working on public infrastructure such as the Gardez-Zurmat road project, trade, and funds controlled by the Taliban's Military Commission.

Jalaluddin Haqqani, like his contemporary Mansoor, was also a cler-

ic, and recruited anti-Soviet mujahideen fighters from his Zairian tribe. The Zadrans mainly inhabited Paktia's uplands and remote border areas. Jalaluddin's son Seraj became head of a key body in the insurgency, the Taliban's eastern military commission. The Haqqani Network which he headed competed with the Mansoor loyalists for influence within the insurgency and on the ground. Simultaneously, traditionally marginalized semi-nomadic tribes such as the Landozai increasingly sided with the Taliban in the hope of leveraging armed power to improve their positions in land disputes. In Zurmat, I observed, that pitted them against Mansoor's kulaks and their settled tribes. This was in keeping with the way the conflict had played out across Afghanistan in the successive phases of the war. Tribal, ethnic and other interest groups picked sides in the national conflict to gain advantage in often intricately nuanced local conflicts.

The Taliban victory altered local power dynamics in ways which had little to do with the movement's declared objectives of expelling the United States and declaring Islam the law of the land; because the Taliban administration's control of the district was uncontested, for example, it was in a stronger position to impinge on local autonomy than the Republican government had been. Meanwhile, the school-educated offspring of the 1980s era mujahideen found themselves frozen out of the labour market by Taliban-linked madrassah graduates, while the two main rival networks leveraged their control of different parts of the state to consolidate their influence in the district and to reward supporters.

1. An Account of Community Mobilization in Zurmat Under the Restored Emirate

The event in August 2022 was, until then, the highest-level engagement between Zurmat community representatives and the Emirate leadership. The principal guest from Kabul was Interior Minister Khalifa Seraj. The visit to the tomb of his family's old network rival Mawlawi Nasrullah Mansoor symbolized an effort to broaden his coalition of support. An attendee described to the author on 9 August 2022, how, in his public speech at the tomb, Khalifa promised to prioritize development projects for Zurmat. He said that he would use his influence on NGOs and the Chinese government to secure investment in the district's main road and mains electricity connection. In a speech in reply, on behalf of the tribes and former jihadi commanders of Zurmat, Haji Mohammad Nabi protested that the

people of Zurmat had seen no concrete benefits from Taliban rule and that this was leading them to question the purpose of the long jihad. The attendee described how Khalifa responded, in keeping with his attempted bridge-building, by inviting Mohammad Nabi to visit him in the ministry to discuss matters one-to-one. Mohammad Nabi's remarks amounted to a criticism of the Islamic Emirate. Khalifa Seraj had to stomach this criticism and respond relatively positively because the criticism was delivered respectfully by an elder with impeccable jihadi credentials who credibly represented a community Khalifa wanted to court. In such a context, a senior Talib could tolerate criticism. This contrasts to the experience, for example, of women protesters in Kabul, whose criticism of the Islamic Emirate the Taliban have routinely suppressed without fear of alienating any domestic constituency they care about.

Mohammad Nabi was chosen to speak by local consensus because of his status as the head of the Salokhel tribe and one of the leading tribal elders in the district. He possesses genuine gravitas; while softly spoken and thoughtful, he has a pedigree in the anti-Soviet jihad and the early Taliban campaign up to 2001. Although Mohammad Nabi participated fully in republican-era Paktia local politics, he narrowly survived a murderous raid by a CIA-backed intelligence unit on his family compound in which two of his brothers and their sons were summarily executed (Clark, 2019). Taliban cannot portray him as a quisling. Throughout the first year of Taliban rule (and indeed subsequently) Mohammad Nabi continued to convene in his residence community representatives of the six main Zurmat sub-districts, each of which has a distinctive tribal make-up. In these meetings the elders discussed local issues and agreed a collective response to the many ways in which actions by the new authorities intruded on their lives. But parallel to the elders' meetings, an informal youth organization was formed by the sons of the leading elders and their peers. The youth of Zurmat developed their own set of concerns, grievances and a programme of action that complemented the elders' drawn-out internal meetings and lobbying of local authorities. Members of the group briefed the author on their activities on multiple occasions during 2022 and 2023.

While Mohammad Nabi's August 2022 speech, with its complaint about Emirate delivery, was a nod to the grievances of the youth, in keeping with the traditions of tribe-state interface he framed their position to be critical but non-confrontational (author's notes, 9 August, 2022). On the basis of their experience of the first year of Taliban rule, the Zurmat

youth had prioritized four issues – taxation, employment, education and local autonomy. On taxation, the youth questioned the Taliban demand that the population hand over the religious ushr and zakat taxes to the Emirate. The Taliban had distributed written tax demands in Zurmat, ordering farmers to pay what they assessed to be ten percent of the wheat crop and orchard production, as ushr. The youth argued that the resources should be retained locally and used to assist the local indigent, in keeping with tradition and normal Muslim practice; as it was no longer waging an insurgency or jihad, the Emirate had no basis for a claim over these resources. Although Mohammad Nabi considered it imprudent to challenge something so fundamental in a public speech, the members of the youth initiative briefed the author on how they quietly urged residents to ignore the demands for ushr. The impact of this first campaign of civil disobedience is unclear, but it laid the foundations for a more effective effort to claim control of local resources the next year. In August 2023, the members of the youth group briefed the author on how their members set up collection points for ushr and local volunteers directly distributed food grains to the local poor. This time the tribal elders did engage with the Emirate's district authorities on the issue. The uluswal (the senior local administrator) backed down, only seeking assurances that they would confirm to the Emirate inspectorate that he had not stolen the proceeds.

In their August 2022 framing of concerns to the author, the youths also demanded protection of the independence of local madrassahs. This turned out to be prescient. By 2023 the proliferation of Emirate-sanctioned madrassahs was one of the developments directly threatening local autonomy, both in Paktia and nationally. By the end of the Republic, about six large private madrassahs operated in Zurmat, including the one in Sahak which hosted Khalifa Seraj's speech, typically serving around 500 day-students each (youth activist briefing to the author, 9 August, 2022). The Zurmatians anticipated a threat to their local autonomy if what they described as the "government of mullahs" used its centralized control of resources to take over local religious institutions or establish state-run ones to compete (field notes by the author, 9 August, 2022; 9 February, 2023). The threat intensified in 2023. Amir Haibatollah championed a national programme of Emirate-funded jihadi madrassahs (Siddique, 2022). Meanwhile, vying for influence in Zurmat, leaders of Taliban factions, including both Khalifa Seraj and Lateef Mansoor, announced plans to establish new madrassahs in the district, answerable to them rather than to the communities.

They claimed that they had liberal budgets and could afford to pay better than the locals. The Zurmat elders decided not to cooperate and sought to block anyone trying to sell land to a Haqqani madrassah (field notes by the author, 2 June, 2023).

On local employment, the organized youth criticized the Emirate ban on recruitment of non-Taliban to civilian posts. As far as the youth are concerned, the Taliban prohibition freezes them out of the most important labour market, with the jobs given to wholly unqualified and unsuitable clerics. Again this was prescient, as in their second and third year, the Emirate doubled down on a policy of hiring only Taliban or their supporters, giving rise to a zero-sum conflict of interest between Taliban and the rest of the population. The loss of the right of educated youth to compete for public sector employment has remained a major grievance. In June 2023, the young Zurmat youth took note of remarks made by the Taliban foreign minister in which he appealed to European governments to send educated young Afghans back to the country rather than offer them asylum (Dawi, 2023). The Zurmat youth ridiculed the foreign minister's position and blamed the Taliban policies for the exodus of young people from Afghanistan. They said that a young person with a masters education does not want to work under the supervision of a cleric who "knows nothing" (field notes by the author, 2 June, 2023).

On education, the youth decided to support equal educational access for boys and girls in the wake of the Taliban prohibition of girls' secondary and tertiary education. This is also an issue on which the community strategies evolved over time.

In reflecting on their prospects in 2022, the organized youth of Zurmat had no illusion about the difficulty of wresting any concessions from the Taliban. But they were confident that they could build pressure. They observed that there had been a palpable change in motivation over the first year of the Emirate. By August 2022, the typical Emirate official was no longer motivated by concern for the jihad and thoughts of paradise. Instead, the youth observed, the Taliban in Zurmat were materially motivated, mainly concerned with laying their hands on fancy cars and the latest weaponry and ammunition (field notes by the author, 9 August, 2022).

The next set-piece engagement between the Zurmat youth and the Emirate authorities took place on the occasion of the appointment of a new Paktia wali (the head of a provincial administration or *wilayat*), later the same month. In tribal terms, the newcomer was a Kandahari Pashtun, from

Urozgan province in the south of the country. In terms of the top-level factional politics then playing out in the administration, this marked the Kandaharis' efforts to wrest control from the tribes of the east and south-east who had the upper hand in the first year. But in terms of local network rivalries, the arrival of Haji Dawat marked a weakening of the hold of Khalifa's Haqqani Network over Paktia – and an apparent opportunity for its local rivals. In a public speech he was invited to make at the new wali's inauguration, Mohammad Nabi urged Dawat to end the imposition on the district of Taliban related to the Haqqani network. The pro-Mansoor Zurmatīs were relatively satisfied with progress and noted that the Emirate pulled most of the external fighters out of Zurmat. By late August 2022, all that remained were the Haqqani-aligned *uluswal* from Syed Karam district and the police chief from Jaji Aryub district. They had only personal contingents of 10–15 bodyguards each. Likewise, the district's four subdistrict police units had all been handed over to local commanders and almost all security personnel were local.

Internal Taliban politics concerning control of administrative and security positions continued to play a role, however, and the tribal representatives were repeatedly dragged into the disputes. The pro-Haqqani *uluswal* in Zurmat was replaced later in the year by Mullah Habibi, linked to the Mansoor network, only to be replaced again by Niaziwal, who had headed the Haqqani's covert terrorist cells in Gardez during the insurgency. This time the Paktia wali claimed to the Zurmat elders that the order had come directly from the Amir and Kandahar and so he was powerless. He suggested they directly lobby the Interior Minister – but the elders assumed that Niaziwal must have been nominated by the Minister, so it was pointless to lobby him (author's field notes, 23 February, 2023).

One of the few episodes of civic resistance to implementation of Emirate extremist policies in Paktia to catch outsiders' attention took place in September 2022 (Radio Azadi 2022). The staff of four girls' high schools in Gardez and one in neighbouring Chamkani district reopened their schools for four days before Taliban authorities intervened to force them to close again. The headmasters were briefly detained. The initiative to open the girls' schools had been backed by a coalition of Paktia tribal elders, who held a series of meetings with the provincial authorities and education department (author's field notes, 13 September, 2022). In one of the meetings in the Habibia High School, the Taliban director of education said that Taliban have no immediate plan to reopen schools but

that they are working on arrangements for Shariat compliance and may be able to open next year. The elders openly ridiculed this stance as a familiar example of the Taliban playing for time. With hindsight we know that the elders were justified in their scepticism. The elders did not accept the authorities' decision to reclose the schools and warned the Taliban that there will be consequences for continued attempts to defy the popular will to allow their children to access education. Paktia community leaders interpreted the chaos over the school ban as a manifestation of the differences between the Haqqani Network and the Kandahari leadership, reckoning that Khalifa Seraj was in favour of relaxing the ban but the Kandaharis were determined to enforce it (author's field notes, 13 September, 2022).

After the impasse over the opening of girls' high schools at the provincial level, Zurmat youth activists identified lack of girls' education as a priority issue and decided to open informal girls' schools in vacant properties in their district. They observed, however, that barriers to girls' education predated the high school ban: even their attendance at primary school had been patchy in the most conservative parts of Zurmat in areas such as Sahak, where Taliban had been most active during the insurgency (author's field notes, 23 November, 2022).

The issue of whom the Emirate authorities would recognize as community or tribal representatives came up repeatedly. In November 2022, the Taliban announced the establishment of consultative shuras¹ in Paktia province and the wider zone. They nominated a mixture of pro-Taliban ulema² and traditional tribal elders to the shuras and allocated them meeting rooms in the old provincial council office in Gardez (author's field notes, 23 November, 2022). The Emirate had of course wound up the old elected provincial councils. The stated purpose of the shuras was to alert the Emirate authorities to the area's needs and to receive delegations sent by the central leadership. The Zurmat elders were prepared to cooperate with this move on the basis that the role of non-Taliban or traditional representatives was to be diluted, not abolished. But in the event, little was heard of these consultative shuras. They seemed to be eclipsed by an initiative championed by the Amir, Haibatollah, in which advisory provincial councils were established consisting exclusively of ulema (Ariana News & Tolo News, 2023).

1 Councils.

2 Senior clerics and Islamic scholars.

Then in June 2023, the Emirate authorities sent letters to mosques in all of the Zurmat sub-districts requesting that the population nominate new tribal representatives. The Salokhel tribe, which dominates one of the sub districts, held a meeting to discuss the response to this Taliban overture. Members of the tribe concluded that the Taliban wanted to replace popular tribal representatives with their stooges, who would support the spreading of Taliban authority and subversion of the traditional role of the tribe in Paktia. They perceived the Taliban as being opposed to respect for tribe and traditional nationalism. They agreed to confirm their loyalty to the existing tribal leadership and proceeded to summon a meeting of all tribes from the other subdistricts, which adopted the same position. When they arranged for a meeting with the *uluswal*, to deliver their decision, they asked the official to explain the thinking behind the request for nominations. The *uluswal* claimed that the order had come from the Amir al-Mu'minin,³ and that Haibatollah believed that all tribal representatives elected during the republican era were stooges for the old republican leadership. However, the *uluswal* deferred to the Zurmat's insistence that existing tribal representatives be retained (author's field notes, 2 June, 2023).

The Taliban's efforts to put clerics in charge of provincial consultative bodies and to hand-pick tribal representatives were a manifestation of the movement's approach to authoritarianism. Public affairs were to be dominated by those with clerical rather than secular credentials and those who submitted to the authority of the Taliban Ameer. But concerted local opposition was sufficient to persuade an Emirate official to drop the attempt to have community representatives changed. This example of Taliban responding to local advocacy reinforces the importance of understanding the specific character and limits of the Emirate's authoritarian power.

Although the Emirate authorities have yet to decapitate the traditional tribal leadership or community representation, the Zurmat's took note of ways in which the Taliban tried to project their repressive apparatus into the district's hinterland, beyond the administrative headquarters. For example, in October 2023, the Taliban established a new unit of their national intelligence agency, the General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI) in the district, designated as "domestic intelligence" (author's field notes, 18 October, 2023). It reports to the provincial directorate in Gardez. Of-

3 The highest leader of an Islamic community – literally "the commander of the faithful".

ficials claimed that the unit's purpose was to monitor the implementation of decisions by district officials; locals concluded that its real purpose was to tighten the surveillance of suspected dissidents in the population, in particular former members of the Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF). The unit is best understood as indicating the Taliban's ongoing investment in repressive apparatus and their ambition to deter any threat to the Emirate's authority, even in the rural areas. There have also been successive clampdowns on Paktia media. As it happens, Khaleel Hamraz, the national director of the GDI's operations to control the media, is from Zurmat. A GDI provincial cell and Mawlvi Hamad of the provincial directorate of communications and culture closely follow social media and give instructions to legacy media to ensure that they avoid any topics regarded as sensitive by the Emirate. In line with the predicament of authoritarian societies, the young activists point out that they can only talk relatively freely when they are in a setting without Taliban officials and possible informers present. They are concerned about Taliban informers supplying distorted reports of any meeting to the authorities.

In March 2023, the Zurmat activists held a festival in the run up to the Persian new year, Nauroz. The youths used the occasion to follow up on another interesting initiative – voluntary demobilization (author's field notes, 30 March, 2023). In another low-profile campaign, they had encouraged men from Zurmat still serving in the Taliban security forces to leave and pursue education. The spirit of the initiative was community disapproval of service in the Emirate armed forces along the lines of “get a life, do not waste your time carrying a gun”. The Salokhel activists conducted a survey during the festival asking about the 3,600 families linked to their tribe, concluding that only one still held a position in the Emirate. The 80 young men who previously served with the Taliban armed forces at the start of the Emirate had all by then left (author's field notes, 30 March, 2023). Community activists and the tribe initially organized for 30 of them to go to the Gulf as migrant labour and looked for economic and educational opportunities for the other 50, to enable them to reintegrate into civilian life.

It is important to stress that this initiative was informal, un-resourced and based on exerting influence within the community. While it touched on one of the key processes at the end of a round of armed conflict, it seemed to pass off with little controversy. One possible explanation is that, nationally, the Taliban gradually pivoted in their approach to recruitment and retention in the armed forces. Initially they try to avoid fragmentation

by keeping all their fighters on the books. Subsequently their emphasis was on excluding from the ranks any interlopers judged not to have served in the jihad. Once this purge was under way, the Zurmat demobilization initiative would not have been seen as a threat. But the real significance of the initiative is that, despite the Emirate's political monopoly, these non-Taliban activists had a vision of civil society with autonomy from the Taliban and their new state.

A series of official visits to Zurmat in by Emirate leaders and Paktia Wali Haji Dawat in September and October 2023 provided occasions for another round of public speeches presenting an Emirate position and community responses. The visitors for the inauguration of a 10 km stretch of highway construction, approved during the Republic, included the Minister of Power Lateef Mansoor, the Minister for Public Works Abdul Manan, first Deputy Minister of the Interior Nabi Omari, and the MoD Director of Plans Qassim Fareed. The speeches provide a marker of how far the cautious rhetoric of community mobilization had come as the Emirate entered its third year. The Taliban's official media carried news of the road project inauguration; participants in the meetings in Zurmat briefed me on the speeches (MEW, 2023; author's field notes, 13 September 2023; 1 November, 2023).

In their speeches, the Emirate leaders asserted that because they now held power, only they could deliver development. They embraced the change in role from sabotage to construction and intended to favour communities which had sided with their jihad against the Republic: "The period of barbarism and destruction is over and now the Taliban have to help the people" (author's field notes, 13 September, 2023). And because the Taliban administration was headed by mujahideen, all Afghans who had previously supported the jihad were also obliged to back the Emirate. They also continued their appeal to network politics, with the key Haqqani-related figure Nabi Omari boasting to the Zurmatists that he had a history of aiding top Mansoor commanders during the jihad. The wali listed Emirate achievements as improving security on the highways and eliminating Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) – even if they had never posed a serious threat in rural Paktia, and Afghans have often pointed out that the Taliban were responsible for the insecurity which they claimed to have solved; as a representative of the emirate, however, the wali was obliged to articulate the official narrative that the Taliban had brought peace.

Two Zurmat representatives were selected to make speeches during

the wali's visit. Malik Neamat from Sahak opted for lavish flattery for the government official, a form of rhetoric which has long been part of the Paktia elders' repertoire, saying that the people of Zurmat hoped for harmonious relations with the Emirate. But Haji Mohammad Nabi of Salokhel raised multiple substantive issues; while, as ever, he avoided outright confrontation, he pushed the boundaries of criticism of the Emirate well beyond what he had seen fit to articulate a year earlier. Mohammad Nabi said that all senior figures of the Emirate who have visited Zurmat, including Seraj Haqqani and Lateef Mansoor, have failed to deliver on the promises of assistance they had made. He told the wali that Zurmat's people wanted a clearer explanation of his intentions, and urged that any VIPs coming in the future should come furnished with the authority to deliver on whatever they promised: Zurmat's people have made many sacrifices but have received nothing in return.

He said that the Emirate should take responsibility for the mass out-migration currently taking place with the young men of Zurmat fleeing the district and country for want of any opportunity. He said that he had heard the Emirate claiming to prioritize the needs of refugees returning from Pakistan. But no one has addressed the needs of the frustrated youth still leaving. Mohammad Nabi blamed the GDI for driving this exodus, as members harass youth over petty things such as displaying a republican flag or for not having a regulation beard. GDI and Ministry of Vice and Virtue checkpoints harass people for acts as simple as listening to a song.

Mohammad Nabi urged the wali to pay attention to the lamentable state of the health system as the district population cannot adequately be served by a basic district hospital and two local clinics. It is the job of the wali to lobby the Ministry of Public Health for further investment. He complained about the activities of the Emirate judges, GDI and uluswals, for harassing the population and failing to abide by the fundamental principles of good governance and justice.

Pointedly, Mohammad Nabi did not mention the issue of girls' education in his speech before the wali. This was a considered decision in response to a direct instruction from the wali's team in advance of the meeting. He decided to comply with the letter of the instruction while going ahead with criticism on multiple other issues. This contrasted with his approach in the previous public gathering; on that occasion, Mohammad Nabi stayed off the topic of girls in his speech but raised it forcefully in a subsequent interview with journalists, which was then broadcast (author's field notes, 13 September, 2023)

The recognized tribal elder used his access to the public space for a cautious airing of popular grievances while deliberately not questioning Emirate legitimacy. But, around the same time, in a private briefing, a leading Zurmat youth activist summarized his understanding of the concerns of youth in Paktia. The critique was more far-reaching and radically critical of the Emirate than the elders' public rhetoric. Indeed, although the youths had proved creative in their use of non-cooperation and self-help to find ways around unpopular Taliban policies, the critique went much further. In autumn 2023, participants in the youth initiative briefed the author on the key points of the latest version of their critique of the Emirate:

- Resources for public works initiatives are provided by the population and do not represent Taliban generosity. The road which the Taliban announced they were building represents nothing more than the people's rights.
- Extracting so many resources, the Taliban have failed to embrace the accountability which people have a right to expect. Multiple mines are now operating under government licences in Logar and Paktia with no transparency of any kind over the identity of the contractors or the division of resources.
- The Taliban only give lucrative contracts to their own people, including relatives of the ministers.
- The population has a right to insist that state resources are invested in a way that creates opportunities for the youth.
- Appointments work the same way as mines – the Taliban are only providing job opportunities to their own people. They are now even inducting mullahs into professional and technical grades.
- Despite the violence of the insurgency, under the republic the population had hope for a peaceful and prosperous future; youth could go to education, universities were full, and girls participated fully.
- The university system is falling apart. The numbers taking the entrance exam halved, and the fact that the Taliban announced that all candidates would get university admission has actually reduced incentives to study. This

announcement makes a mockery of the entrance exam for the future.

- People are fed up – but know they will be punished if they raise their voices. Therefore many young people choose to leave the country.
- Any right-thinking Taliban knows that they need to invest in education – but they can do nothing about it because the extremists in Kandahar oppose it.
- Young Paktia are determined to defend their culture and traditions against unwelcome interference from the Taliban extremists.

The points raised by the young Zurmatīs provide an insightful account of how the generation that came of age during the Republic has responded to the Taliban narrative. They are unimpressed by the Taliban's claims to have delivered anything in the economy and they blame the Taliban's Islamism for excluding them from jobs, educational opportunities and public resources. The youth, many of whom were well-rooted in Paktia's tribal society, possessed an idea of Afghan modernity completely at odds with the Taliban's dismissal of progress under the Republic as cultural contamination. But the Taliban clampdown on criticism means that the youth can only manifest these grievances through their carefully non-confrontational community-based activities. If the evolving situation eventually allows for more mobilization, however, these are the grievances which Paktia youth can be expected to bring to any movement.

Then in the final months of 2023, Zurmat's local leadership added another key issue to their agenda of concerns. The district has a long history of migration to Pakistan and of enduring ties to fellow tribal people who have established themselves there. In times of disaster or need in Zurmat, one of the first responses for any family is to call up clansmen in Pakistan and to ask for help. The mass deportation of Afghans announced by the Pakistan caretaker administration in the autumn threatened this pillar of Zurmat society. The Emirate's public position was to welcome migrants back rather than making any formal *démarche* to have Pakistan halt the deportations. Anticipating an inadequate response on behalf of the Emirate to the influx, the Zurmatīs conducted another voluntary mobilization, collecting food and non-food items, making arrangements for accommodation and sending volunteers to one of the border reception points. In the

event, the initial influx into Zurmat was relatively modest and within the community's capability to absorb it. Most of the established Zurmat communities in Karachi, etc., survived the initial wave of deportations intact, if greatly unsettled by the prospect of being targeted in future.

2. Reflections on the Nature of Local Politics in the Shadow of the Taliban's Restored Emirate

The Zurmat experience demonstrated the continuing possibility of some local politics, both there and more widely in Paktia. Both Taliban and community members draw upon a political culture which prescribes autonomous tribal organization and engagement with the state. The Zurmat retained sufficient of this autonomy to hold multiple meetings within their communities to reflect on developments, build consensus and agree initiatives. They engaged frequently with the Emirate authorities at both the district and provincial levels. Indeed, we noted many more examples of this engagement than there was space to record in the summary above. Much of the business conducted can be characterized as “everyday engagement” – community representatives trying to get things done for their people, rather than trying to reform the system. But the Zurmat also had at least limited access to a public space. This included some occasions organized by community leaders (such as the anniversary of the death of Mohammad Nabi's brothers), to which the community typically invited officials. More frequently, Emirate officials invited select community or tribal representatives to their events. In both of these versions of public space, Emirate officials and the Zurmat articulated a version of their position, thus generating a public record of their engagement. The public positions, of course, typically contrasted with what actors said privately.

This pattern of community organization and political engagement delivered some clear wins for the community, including limiting coverage of the ushr tax and preserving local tribal autonomy. As well as resisting Emirate efforts to dominate local representation, the tribal elders successfully defended their prerogative to mediate local disputes, a key aspect of their role in Paktia, on which Taliban have periodically encroached. The cautious civil disobedience around ushr and the range of self-help initiatives, such as encouraging youths to demobilize from the Emirate forces and the assistance for refugees, delivered significant wins without requiring any compromise or change from the Emirate. They mitigated, rather than altered, Emirate policies.

The Zurmat tribal elders and youth alike were, when among friends, highly critical of the Emirate and its governance. They retained as much autonomy and freedom of action in the public sphere as they reckoned they could get away with without provoking the different kinds of Taliban they encountered. They developed a nuanced strategy for engagement. On one level, all Taliban had to be assumed loyal defenders of the Emirate collective interest. But Taliban deployed to the district from Kandahar could be courted as neutral in Paktia network rivalries, while community figures could approach Zurmat Taliban as potential rivals or allies depending on the context. In all such dealings they prudently designed their practical initiatives to be non-confrontational. They seem to have lived by Snyder's dictum for life under tyranny: "Be as brave as you can" (Snyder, 2017). At the national level, by adopting non-confrontational positions, refraining from mobilization and offering, at most, nuanced criticism in the public space, non-Taliban actors engaged in self-preservation. Their approach should certainly not be understood as consent for the regime, or indeed that the regime is in any way inclusive.

It was notable that the lines between internal Taliban politics and civilian politics were at times blurred, especially regarding the intense network rivalry within the Emirate. Zurmat civilians cared about which internal faction had the upper hand. And Taliban factional players wanted to court civilian support to strengthen their position.

But on the major issues which the Emirate had chosen to regard as strategic, the Emirate proved impervious to lobbying and advocacy. Indeed, the senior officials to whom the Zurmatists had access were ultimately appointees of the Amir. They could discharge their administrative responsibilities and pursue their network interests within the Emirate but had no say in strategic policy-making. The officials probably felt themselves as powerless as the non-Taliban on the key contested issues. Although Zurmatists were deeply concerned about the ban on girls' education and the Taliban monopoly on state employment, they had no traction on these issues with the Emirate.

The Taliban claimed legitimacy by asserting that they have implemented an Islamic system and claimed that by "defeating" the United States, they restored Afghan independence and the natural order within Afghanistan. But the case of local politics in Zurmat indicates how little credence Afghans give to these propositions, even in a district where the Taliban were active throughout the insurgency. It is notable that contests

over religious ideology barely featured in the community's engagement with the Emirate. Far from Taliban victory having restored an equilibrium, a great deal of local politics was an attempt to deal with the consequences of one cluster of networks enjoying a windfall monopoly control of power and resources. The Zurmat's public and private positions, however, made it clear that they considered themselves locked in a contest over culture, identity and disputed ideas of Afghan modernity. In this context, it is significant that the Zurmat's who undertook the local mobilization described above were organically rooted in Paktia's Pashtun tribal society and identified with a historic tradition of jihad – they were not de-cultured émigrés. Their fundamental cultural differences with the Taliban concerned the role of contemporary education, engagement with the modern world and women's rights, all of which the Zurmat's embraced. As far as the Zurmat's were concerned, the Taliban's determination to impose a retrogressive mullah's vision threatened their very way of life – something most vividly illustrated by the desperation of so many young people from the district to flee abroad.

In the course of their community mobilization, the Zurmat's were increasingly aware of the constraints of trying to do politics within a context of spreading authoritarianism. They were at all times concerned with understanding the latest developments in the Taliban's repressive apparatus. There was public space without freedom of speech. Everything that responsible actors said was calculated. In the public space they self-censored, even while pushing the envelope as far as they dared. In private space there was growing paranoia about what might be reported. And they were familiar with tales of peers who had been persecuted for what they said or wrote on the telephone.

On one level, the extent of community mobilization and engagement with the Emirate was remarkable given the Taliban's abolition of all representative bodies and their refusal to allow any other groups a share in decision-making. But it was also clear that, despite their clever leveraging of the authority of traditional tribal leadership, the Zurmat's could not address any of their strategic concerns. The gulf between public and private positions showed how reticent community representatives had to be while supposedly advocating for their community. It is likely that every key Zurmati actor considered the Taliban political monopoly and the Emirate itself illegitimate, and Taliban policies contrary to their interests and identity – but none of them could articulate as much in a public space.

The recent literature on civic action under conditions of authoritarianism offers insights into the dynamics of interaction between grassroots organizations like the Zurmat group, or more formal civil society organizations and the state. International experience suggests a wide diversity of paths and outcomes is possible. Civil society has generally survived in some form, usually subject to highly restrictive regulation, under all but the most extreme authoritarian regimes. Indeed, the relationship with the authoritarian state may amount to a symbiosis. The Zurmatists could look to neighbouring Tajikistan, where despite the 2021 crackdown on popular protests in Gorno Badakhshan, the regime tolerates multiple civil society organisations and a local decision-making role for community representatives. Somewhat more radically, the 2015 mobilization by Oromo in Ethiopia has been proposed as an example of grassroots action driving at least some measure of democratic reform in an authoritarian regime. But Myanmar after the 2021 coup and Sudan after the 2019 overthrow of Omar al-Bashir provide more challenging examples of grassroots activism and civil society involvement in movements against authoritarianism followed by large-scale armed conflict and political impasse (Lewis, 2013; Pellerin, 2023; Fisher Melton, 2023; Tolla & Royo, 2022).

The risk of authoritarians co-opting or intimidating civil society has direct relevance for the design of international peace initiatives for Afghanistan. These have typically involved efforts to involve Taliban and civil society actors in “meaningful political dialogue”. In the light of usage during the pre-2021 peace process, “meaningful” should be understood as a political process in which the parties are empowered to address power at the national level, government and the political system. But if the participants of such a dialogue are to be expected to articulate freely their community’s concerns, it will have to be designed to protect them from the restrictions and threats which have constrained the Zurmati leaders in Paktia’s public space.

At the national level, we can expect the pivotal contested issue to remain the Taliban’s claim to a monopoly of power; access to resources, culture, religion and ethnic relations are all linked to the idea of the Amir exercising absolute authority. Time will tell how long the Taliban can retain the monopoly and whether their determination to suppress demands for a more inclusive system ultimately precipitates a return to more generalized conflict. Whether the eventual transition is achieved violently or through an as-yet unimagined peaceful process, non-Taliban local actors, such as

the Zurmat youth and their elders, anticipate that they will play a role in that transition, hoping to return their communities and their country to an equilibrium.

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