

The Corruption of the Afghan Presidency

How Washington missed the nefarious practices of Ashraf Ghani

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Before last month, when he fled in disgrace as his country fell to the Taliban, Afghanistan’s former president, Ashraf Ghani, was unusual among American-backed despots. He appealed to Washington’s foreign-policy elite, with his technocrat pedigree and a doctorate from Columbia University.

Unlike Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, or Iraq’s former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, Ghani was an intellectual and social peer. He made a good dinner party guest. Between TED Talks and think-tank forums, Ghani had written a book on fixing failed states. His favorite utensil, presumably, wasn’t a bone saw.

Ghani, a former U.S. citizen, had American sensibilities that charmed his benefactors. “He knew the right words to say,” wrote [The Atlantic](#). After his election in 2014, the august magazine reported approvingly on how, unlike his predecessor, Ghani had never confronted any American politicians with inconvenient pictures of Afghan children cowering in fear during Pentagon night raids. Afghanistan was America’s “good war,” and Ghani was America’s good warlord. He was also good at covering his tracks.

Even now, outside of his decision to abandon his country when there was still a chance to negotiate a political settlement with the Taliban, Ghani has largely been eulogized as a flawed but incorruptible visionary. This is a facade. Attributing Ghani’s failures to his professorial management style and personal cowardice allows American elites to avoid confronting the truth behind the Taliban victory. Military occupations fail because they are corrupt and brutal, and the Ghani regime, enabled by the Pentagon and its backers in Washington, was as corrupt and brutal as any.

From the moment he came to power in 2014, Ghani’s rule was tainted. [Leaked tapes](#) revealed election officials stuffing ballot boxes in Ghani’s favor. “[G]iven the apparent closeness of the election and the involvement of the chief electoral officer in fraud, it is almost impossible that we will ever know who won,” said a leaked State Department memo, obtained by [The New Yorker](#). Ghani officially became president after the United States

brokered a power-sharing agreement with his closest rival. Then-Secretary of State John Kerry called the undemocratic deal a “triumph of statesmanship.” But during Ghani’s 2019 re-election campaign, which was plagued by similar allegations of ballot-stuffing, Afghans, who did not trust the legitimacy of the election, voted in record-low numbers.

Ghani’s reign was maintained by violence, warlordism, and terror. His first running mate was Uzbek war criminal [Abdul Rashid Dostum](#), a mass-murdering rapist and longtime ally of the CIA and American Special Forces. Dostum is accused of countless crimes against humanity, including [suffocating](#) and baking thousands of prisoners in shipping crates, driving [tanks](#) over others, directing the [ethnic cleansing, including rape, extortion, and execution](#), of captured civilian populations, and personally overseeing the [rape of a kidnapped political opponent](#) with an assault rifle. While human rights activists viewed Dostum’s appointment with horror, foreign-policy experts saw it as a sign of political maturity. “Ghani was showing that he, too, could play politics the old, dirty way,” wrote [The New Yorker](#) about the deal with Dostum. And beyond Dostum, the Ghani government was also filled with other [notorious war criminals](#).

Apologists might justify making deals with warlords as a political necessity, but war crimes were also carried out by forces directly under Ghani’s command. The country’s intelligence agency, the feared National Directorate of Security, assassinated Ghani’s political opponents. They also coordinated with the CIA and U.S. Special Forces on feared night raids known for extrajudicial killings of civilians in rural villages. The regular Afghan military wasn’t much better. A recent [New Yorker](#) article accused a powerful general, Sami Sadat, of ordering mass killings of civilians as collective punishment after their villages were captured by the Taliban. “We knew they were civilians,” one Afghan helicopter pilot reportedly said after gunning down civilians in a market.

These atrocities helped push rural Afghans into the arms of the Taliban. But for his American backers, with the occupation costing trillions of dollars, at least Ghani wasn’t *that* dirty.

Except he was. Ghani, during his nearly seven years in power, found ways to enrich his brother, his brother-in-law, and other members of his inner circle. This April, I co-authored a two-year-long investigation, published by the [Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project](#), that revealed the Afghan president’s office had approved unique extralegal rights for the subsidiary of an American military contractor to purchase, process, and sell the metal chromite from local Afghan mines. Normally, buying from these types of mines was prohibited because it risked funding groups like the Taliban and the Islamic State’s Afghan affiliate. But this subsidiary was special.

Secret documents obtained from the United Arab Emirates, where Ghani fled after being deposed, show that his brother, Hashmat Ghani, owned 20 percent of the military contractor’s subsidiary that had won these rights.

A few years earlier, Afghanistan’s [Pajhwok News](#) uncovered another crooked contract. A Beirut based company, Khatib & Alami, obtained \$16 million in sole-source contracts from the Afghan government, without going through a public bid process or receiving a valid work permit from the government. Later, Afghan government officials acknowledged the contract had been brokered by Riad Saada, the brother of Afghanistan’s first lady, Rula Ghani.

Ghani was personally in [attendance](#) as the Afghan National Procurement Authority signed off

on a different questionable deal in 2019. The government granted an \$11 million telecommunications and fee collection contract to the owner of a small defunct airline company, the Bustos Group, which had no prior telecommunications experience. Leaked messages from the company's CEO, Josh Bustos, explained that Afghan officials had guaranteed him the contract prior to its being awarded. "No bribes no under the table issues up front," he wrote. "Back end I am sure I will be hiring some specific Afghans to management roles."

Despite these deals, the narrative around Ghani's incorruptibility has remained. To the Washington foreign-policy elite, Ghani represented the belief that if you put an educated technocrat in charge, you can maintain an occupation of drone strikes and commando raids forever. But it's clear, now that the Taliban have taken Kabul, that this was a fantasy. An educated technocrat is also corruptible.

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