

## The Political Consequences of the Afghan Electoral System: Voting for an Individual in a Multi-Member District

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### Abstract

The application of the single non-transferable vote system (SNTV) to large multiple-member districts causes a mismatch between the system of candidate choice and electorate size. The application of the SNTV system produced biased results in the favor of a larger group in a constituency. Therefore, large ethnic groups, both national and local, achieve better representation and greater benefits from the system than do local and national ethnic groups that are in the minority.

This study carried out a qualitative data analysis and included interviews with a number of Afghan Members of Parliament (MPs) and politicians to examine the hypothesis that a candidate from a large ethnic group is more likely to support the current electoral system than a candidate from a small ethnic group, since the former type of candidate benefits more from the SNTV with large constituencies than does the latter type. The relevance of the advantages of the electoral system for particular ethnic groups and the level of support from the particular ethnic groups for the system is clearly supported by this paper.

**Key Words:** Afghanistan, current electoral system, ethnicity, constituency, education

## Afganistan Seçim Sisteminin Siyasal Sonuçları: Çok Adaylı Seçim Çevresinde Oy Kullanılması

### Özet

Tek adaylı tercihli oy sisteminin çok adaylı seçim çevresine uygulanması aday belirlenmesi ve seçmen büyüklüğü arasında bir kargaşaya yol açmaktadır. Bu sistemin uygulanması bir seçim çevresinde çoğunlukta olan grubu avantajlı duruma getiren olumsuz bir durum ortaya çıkarmaktadır. Bu yüzden bu sistem içinde çoğunlukta olan etnik gruplar azınlıkta olan etnik gruplara nazaran hem ulusal hem de yerel düzeyde bu uygulamadan faydalanarak iyi bir temsil hakkı elde edebilmektedirler.

Bu çalışmanın temelini oluşturan veriler Afganistan'da bir çok milletvekili ve siyasetçi ile ikili görüşmeler yapmak suretiyle elde edilmiş ve niteliksel veri analizi yöntemiyle değerlendirilmiştir. Çalışmanın hipotezi ise çoğunlukta olan etnik grubun adayının mevcut seçim sistemini azınlıkta olan etnik grubun adayına göre destekleme ihtimalinin daha yüksek olduğudur. Çoğunlukta olan etnik grubun aday büyük seçim çevrelerinde tek adaylı tercihli oy sisteminden azınlıkta olan grubun adayına göre daha fazla yararlanır. Belli bir etnik grup açısından bu seçim sisteminin avantajları ve bu sistemin söz konusu etnik grup tarafından desteklenme derecesi bu çalışmada net bir şekilde ortaya konulmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Afganistan, mevcut seçim sistemi, etnik aidiyet, seçim çevresi, eğitim

### Introduction

The election for Afghanistan's National Assembly in 2005 provided a critical opportunity to achieve a sustainable peace in a country that is still emerging from decades of war and civil conflicts that were created by ethnic, religious, and linguistic divisions.

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Afghanistan, with a population of 29.83 million<sup>1</sup> consists of different ethnic groups. The known ethnic groups in the country include the Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Aimak, Turkmen, Baloch, and others. The main objective of this paper is to explore and understand the political consequences of using the single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system in a multi-polity society such as Afghanistan during the first Afghan parliamentary election in 2005.

The political consequences of using an electoral system in a multi-ethnic society are worth discussing, since experience and studies show that the selection of an electoral system in newly emerged democracies has a significant impact on the entire process of further democratization in a country. "Electoral systems have long been recognized as one of the most important institutional mechanisms, in that they structure the arena of political competition."<sup>2</sup>

Scholarly and politically it is said that the elections and electoral systems have the power to resolve deep-rooted animosities and to bring the discordant and conflicting groups into a stable and institutionalized political system.<sup>3</sup> Establishing the importance of institutional design in newly emerged democracies, and especially in societies with sharp ethnic and religious divisions, has been considered one of the most significant tasks for institutional designers and theorists.<sup>4</sup>

Scholars and theorists such as Andrew Reynolds, Donald L. Horwitz, Benjamin Reilly, and Arend Lijphart, as well as others, who worked on institutional design and conflict management in divided and multi-ethnic societies, agree that furthering democracy in divided societies and multi-ethnic societies is more challenging than in unified ones. It is in divided and multi-ethnic societies that an institutional design can systematically favor or disadvantage a particular group.<sup>5</sup>

The September 2005 Afghanistan Parliamentary election marked an end to the political process outlined in the 2001 Bonn Agreement. The process for designing Afghanistan's constitution was efficient and closed. A nine-member committee was appointed by interim President Hamid Karzai. The committee members came up with an initial draft between October 2002 and March 2003. One of the most important of the committee's constitutional tasks was the choice of an electoral system for the new legislature.

The committee discussed various issues and questions, such as whether they should return to the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system that had been used during the 1960s, or whether they should stick with the list-based proportional representation (List PR) system that has been the system of choice in the vast majority of post-conflict societies since 1989,<sup>6</sup> or whether there might be another system that would fit better with Afghanistan's political circumstances.<sup>7</sup> After discussing these questions and having sessions with international experts, the committee wrote their first draft as follows:

<sup>1</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, <https://www.cia.gov>, Last modified July 11, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Reynolds, ed., *The Architecture of Democracy: Constitutional Design, Conflict Management, and Democracy*, New York: Oxford University Press 2009, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ben Reilly and Andrew Reynolds, *Electoral Systems and Conflict in Divided Societies* Washington DC: National Research Council, Committee on International Conflict Resolution 1999, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Reynolds, *The Architecture of Democracy*, op. cit., 3.

<sup>5</sup> Reynolds, *The Architecture of Democracy*, op. cit., 2-5.

<sup>6</sup> The year 1989 mostly understood as the Western political modernity and the idea of liberal democracy.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Reynolds, "The curious case of Afghanistan," *Journal of Democracy*, 17 2006, 105.

“The electoral system needs to allow for the representation of Afghanistan’s diversity, and give all contenders for power enough of a stake in the system that they remain bound to democratic politics. Given the factionalized nature of Afghan politics, the primary goal should be to produce reasonable proportionality. In addition, most Afghans want an opportunity to vote for candidates from their own area, and the distrust of political parties means that voters should be given the chance to vote for individuals, rather than only parties. Voting procedure will also need to be simple and transparent; illiteracy and innumeracy limit the complexity of possible voting system, and inexperience with voting also means that results must be easily explicable.”<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, among the other alternatives, such as the closed-list PR system, the SNTV system was chosen as the electoral system for Afghanistan for the following reasons: First, the SNTV system is known for its simplicity; therefore, it was the better option to introduce a simple system into a country with a high level of illiteracy and low experience of elections.

The system is easy to explain to the voters, and it is easy for the voter to follow at the voting booth; moreover, the votes are easy for the polling officials to count. Second, the Afghan people have not had a positive image of the political parties since the time of the Soviet invasion, and continue to distrust them.<sup>9</sup> However, according to one Afghan politician, the choice of the SNTV system for Afghan elections has been imposed by foreign advisors. This type of system in Afghanistan encourages individualism and ethnic divisions among the population, and discourages an emphasis on ideologies, political agendas, and collectivism.<sup>10</sup>

The research tackles the following question: What are the political consequences of using the SNTV system in a multi-polity, post-conflict society such as Afghanistan? And the proposed answer to the question, or the hypothesis regarding the current question, is as follows: A candidate from large ethnic group is more likely to support the current electoral system than is a candidate from a small ethnic group, since the former type of candidate benefits more from the SNTV with large constituencies than does the latter type.

A qualitative research design has been chosen for this study. The descriptive nature of the research question for this study is associated more strongly with qualitative data-based analysis. This descriptive analysis supports the findings and arguments of this study, by providing more precise accounts of the beliefs, ideas, knowledge, experience, and opinions of particular individuals and particular groups related to the topic of the study.

The interviews were designed in a semi-structured and one-to-one format. Twenty people have been interviewed. This number includes 16 MPs and 4 political science professors. Each interview lasted from 30 minutes to 1 hour, often depending on the interviewee’s time availability.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 107-110.

<sup>9</sup> Sanjay Gathia and Somsri Hananuntasuk, “Afghanistan Ushering in a New Era of Democracy: First General Election on Islamic Republic of Afghanistan,” *Asian Network for Free Election* 2006, 12-20.

<sup>10</sup> Wadir Safi. Interview by author, Kabul, Professor of Law and Political Science, Kabul, August 22, 2010.

**Table 1:** Profile of the Interviewees

Ethnicity	Gender	Constituency	Occupation
9 Tajik	13 Men	16 Kabul	16 MPs
7 Pashtun	7 Women	1 Badghiz	4 Political Science professors
4 Hazara		1 Nangarhar	
		1 Herat	
		1 Bamiyan	
Total 20			

**Source:** Author's Interview with Members of Parliament and Politicians

### The literature on the Single Non-Transferable Vote System

The single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system is a rarely used system that was employed in Japan from 1948 to 1993, but as of 2011 only Jordan, Vanuatu, the Pitcairn Islands, Afghanistan, and Taiwan (to an extent) use this system. In the SNTV system, someone votes for only one candidate, regardless of the number of seats of a given constituency is allocated, and votes are not transferable to other candidates or political parties. The candidate who receives the majority of the votes wins the seat. The SNTV system simultaneously encourages personality-driven politics and undermines the role of political parties.<sup>11</sup> The SNTV system is easy to explain to the voters; votes are simple to count and the process is easy to administer; and the system ensures representation of independent candidates rather than political parties. Under the SNTV system, candidates of a party compete against their own party mates. Hence, each candidate is concerned with his/her own interests. Moreover, the SNTV system promotes a "politics of personality"<sup>12</sup> that may end in the election of candidates who are not best qualified. In this sense, the system seems to be more promising of favors; the most well-known person in a district is likely to get more votes than other candidates.

Most of the scholarly literature has generally classified the electoral systems into the three main categories of *proportional systems*, *semi-proportional systems*, and *majority electoral systems*, and each system has its sub-branches. The SNTV system has been considered as being under the semi-proportional system, a notion supported by scholars such as Lakeman, Lijphart, Norris, and Reynolds. The SNTV system is mostly known as the Japanese long-lasting electoral system, since Japan used this system for its parliamentary elections from 1948 to 1993.

Lijphart examined the political consequences of electoral systems to compare the SNTV with other types of electoral systems, such as the Limited Vote (LV) and Single

<sup>11</sup> Gathia and Hananuntasuk, "Afghanistan Ushering in a New Era of Democracy", op. cit., 10-20.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Transferable Vote (STV) systems in Japan, Ireland, and Malta. According to Lijphart, the SNTV system is difficult to classify; in terms of the traditional electoral systems classifications, the SNTV system has been regarded as an intermediate system between plurality and majority systems, and sometimes as a branch of a PR system. In his research, the scholar found a family resemblance among these electoral systems. Lijphart suggests that the STV and SNTV systems closely resemble the list PR system. The STV (Single Transferable Vote) system is already considered to be a form of PR system; therefore, the SNTV system also should be considered one, and should be grouped with other members of the PR systems.<sup>13</sup>

Garry W. Cox and Emerson Niou examine the discourses that reflect the tension arising from the theoretical expectation that the SNTV system should hurt large parties and the empirical fact that the large parties do very well under the SNTV system. Cox and Niou warn that errors can occur as a result of the large dominant political parties and opposition parties under the SNTV system, as can be seen by looking at the case studies of the Japanese Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the Taiwanese Kuomintang of China (KMT); Japan and Taiwan were using the SNTV system for electing members for their lower houses. According to the authors, the dominant Japanese party, LDP, and the large party of Taiwan did very well under the SNTV system, and even were overrepresented because of some errors made by other larger political parties.

Reviewing the elections under the operation of the SNTV system in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, Grofman, Lee, Winckler, and Woodall found that, although the SNTV system tends to produce more proportional results regarding the vote and seat allocation than other plurality systems, the system has several potentially negative characteristics. Grofman emphasizes that the SNTV system can provide incentives for factionalism among the political parties because of its inter- and intra-party competition characteristics, and that this dynamic can lead to the emergence of blocs of reliable voters. Additionally, localized politics and politics can develop based on personality rather than on policies, agendas, and issues. The SNTV system promotes politicians' and candidates' providing money and services to the voters in return for their support and loyalty to the candidates. This feature of the system potentially leads politicians and voters toward corruption. Moreover, the authors report that the SNTV system, in multimember districts and as a semi-proportional system, provides spaces for more than two parties in the electoral competition; thus the system potentially encourages political variance among districts.<sup>14</sup>

Howard Van Trease questions the political successes and instability in the Republic of Vanuatu under the operation of the SNTV system. His analysis shows that, unlike other countries that operated under the SNTV system and frequently faced party fractionalization within the large parties and government coalitions, Vanuatu could achieve a degree of proportionality under SNTV. Van Trease reports that the reason that the SNTV system was

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<sup>13</sup> Arend Lijphart, "SNTV and STV Compared: Their Political Consequences in Japan, Ireland, and Malta," in *Elections in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan under the Single Non-transferable Vote*, ed. Bernard Grofman, Sung-Chull Lee, Edwin A. Winckler, and Brian Woodall Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1999, 289-300.

<sup>14</sup> Sung-Chull Lee, "Politics of Electoral Reforms and Practices: The Case of Korean SNTV Elections under the Yushin Constitution, in Bernard Grofman, Sung-Chull Lee, Edwin A. Winckler, and Brian Woodall, eds., *Elections in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan under the Single Non-Transferable Vote: The Comparative Study of an Embedded Institution*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1999, 14-15.

adopted in Vanuatu was that the system is potentially able to achieve a fair degree of seats and votes proportionally, and that it allows minority groups and parties to win seats and share representation. The author points out that SNTV is a simple system regarding seat and vote proportionality, but the system develops fractionalization and tactical difficulties in exacting voters' support for appropriate candidates and the running of an appropriate number of candidates for office.<sup>15</sup>

Jih-wen Lin points out the possible political results of using SNTV, using the case studies of Japan and Taiwan as examples. According to the author, under SNTV the vote won by a candidate is nontransferable, and whether one gets elected depends only on the rank of his or her own vote share. Their vote being restricted to one candidate, voters tend to select a candidate who serves their special interests. Several results can be indicated as follows: First, SNTV gives those elected an incentive to cultivate patron-client networks, as this is the best way to secure the support of particular interest groups. Second, the system generates factionalism and divisions within political parties, whose candidates must compete with each other over the ballots cast by the party faithful. Third, the system favors well-organized parties that can coordinate their nominations and distribute their supporters' votes in a way that maximizes the number of their candidates elected in each district. Fourth, under SNTV, those whose election depends on patronage and other particularistic connections need the support of a stable coalition that can effectively manage the tasks of resources distribution and nomination coordination. Hence, Lin's analysis shows how the Japanese LDP and the Taiwanese KMT were benefiting under the SNTV, and how Japan and Taiwan reformed their electoral systems, turning to mixed but more majoritarian ones.<sup>16</sup>

### Literature Concerning the SNTV System in Afghanistan

A leading expert on Afghanistan, Barnett R. Rubin, pointed out that designers of the constitution or the electoral systems in Afghanistan would do well to consider the following issues: national reconciliation; the strength of regional, ethnic and sectarian loyalties; the war-weariness of the population and the desire for the rule of law; the weakness of the administration; the absence of a census; mathematical competence; respect for elders; the low level of literacy; and the weakness of political parties. Rubin suggests that to manifest strong and effective government in Afghanistan, the legislature should not be extremely factionalized; it must allow opportunities for minorities' representatives to express their viewpoints. According to Rubin, the SNTV system "does not encourage coalitions, but it is relatively simple to participate and to administer."<sup>17</sup>

Reynolds and Wilder, in speculating about how the SNTV system might be adapted to be used under present conditions in Afghanistan, postulate some potential negative consequences. The authors explain that the SNTV system has some serious drawbacks in terms of creating stable and legitimate institutions of government, and this fact is important to consider in an emerging and a fragile democracy such as Afghanistan. Based on their

<sup>15</sup> Howard Van Trease, "The Operation of the Single Non-transferable Vote System in Vanuatu," *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 43, 2005, 296-332.

<sup>16</sup> Jih-wen Lin, "The Politics of Reform in Japan and Taiwan," in *Electoral Systems and Democracy*, ed. Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 2006, 196-207.

<sup>17</sup> Barnett R. Rubin, "Forms of Government and Electoral Systems: Summary of Briefing Papers for the Constitutional Drafting Commission of Afghanistan," Center on International Cooperation 2003, 1-8.

overview of the SNTV system, Reynolds and Wilder list some negative consequences that might result from applying this system, in such areas as the translation of votes into seats, since in the provinces seat shares would depend on how many candidates stood in a province and how voters distributed their votes across the candidates. The SNTV system in larger provinces encourages a large number of candidates to run for the elections, resulting in long and confusing ballot paperwork; therefore, voters become alienated and are unable to see the link between their votes and the newly formed government; for instance in the case of candidates that have party backed support but does not show in the ballot papers, voters find difficulty to grasp which blocs will likely be influential in the new parliament. However, the fragmented effect of the SNTV system has a positive effect on the promotion of dynamic female representation in the parliament and the ability of the elected bodies to govern.<sup>18</sup>

Carol Riphenburg indicates that the SNTV system has some drawbacks, as one of the SNTV system's characteristics is that it encourages political parties to nominate many candidates, and the candidates have to compete for the votes, so the political parties have to educate their voters to distribute their votes equally among the candidates. As Riphenburg points out, in Afghanistan it is hard to imagine any political party having such firm organizational ability in the foreseeable future. Under the SNTV system, Afghanistan elections to the lower house (*Wolesi Jirga* or House of the People) will provide broad representation of Afghanistan's multiplicity of social entities. Moreover, the author points out, that in Afghanistan the choice of the SNTV system is in conflict with the Afghan Electoral Law; as she indicates, Afghan Electoral Law permits political parties to run candidates, but the SNTV system reduces the chances that a dynamic and an accountable party system will be developed.<sup>19</sup>

Richard Atwood, the Chief of Operations for the joint UN and Afghan election administration in 2005, examined the administrative framework of 2005 parliamentary elections under the SNTV system. In his report, Atwood indicates that the electoral system that had been chosen for the Afghan legislative election requires strong financial and administrative support, due to its nature. Atwood points out, "The SNTV system in larger constituencies attracted the large number of candidates to run for the election; the large number of candidates leads to the large number of ballot papers that proved difficult to use in some of the provinces and expensive to produce and distribute." Atwood adds that the parliamentary election in 2005 was conducive to fraud, attributing that possibility to the following factors: "First, for some candidates running as individuals rather than on party lists, losing was an intensely personal loss of face. Many losing candidates were quick to allege fraud and lodge complaints that were difficult to prove or disprove. Second, very small vote margins separated those winning seats from those losing."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Andrew Reynolds and Andrew Wilder, "Free, Fair or Flawed: Challenges for Legitimate Elections in Afghanistan," Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, Briefing paper September 2004, 12-16.

<sup>19</sup> Carol J. Riphenburg, "Electoral Systems in a Divided Society: The Case of Afghanistan," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 34, no. 1 April 2007, 1-21.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Atwood, "The Framework for Elections Administration in Afghanistan," Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit 2007, 1-7.

### Historical Background of Afghan Electoral System

At the national level, Afghanistan had experienced few democratic institutions prior to the 2005 elections. Afghanistan has a long tradition of tribal democracy. “The traditional jirga have long embodied the egalitarian principle of meeting in a circle, with no hierarchies implied. Following long deliberations on important tribal issues or conflict resolution, the jirga would decide by consensus.” Looking to the history of Afghanistan, it has been argued that the semi-parliamentary institutions were instated during the King Amir Amanullah Khan’s period, when he introduced a parliament, provincial council and the first constitution. Later, during the King Zahir Shah’s period the democratic initials brought “pluralistic and secret elections as well as parliamentary debate and a free press”.<sup>21</sup> This period is also known as decades of democracy in Afghanistan. Although the first written Afghan Constitution was already adopted in 1923, the 1964 Afghan Constitution was considered as a modern type of constitution of its time. The constitution of 1964 tried to combine the Afghan Islamic tradition with some principles of modern Western Constitution. The 1964 Constitution for the first time abandoned the members of the Royal House to establish political parties and it declared that the members of Royal House shall not hold the offices of Prime Minister or Ministers, Member of the Shura (Parliament) and Justice of the Supreme Court.<sup>22</sup>

The Parliament under the 1964 Constitution consisted of two houses same as the post-2001 parliaments, Wolesi Jirga (House of the People or Lower House) and Meshranu Jirga (House of the Elders or Upper House). The members of the Lower House were directly elected by people for the term of four years, through simple majority vote system (First Past the Post Electoral System), as Article No 43 of the 1964’s constitution stated “Members of the Wolesi Jirga (House of the People) shall be elected by the people of Afghanistan in a free, universal, secret and direct election.”

For this purpose the country was divided into the Electoral Constituencies, and each constituency had to select one representative to the parliament (the single member district).<sup>23</sup> However, in the practice the political system that was set up by the constitution faced some constraints due to a number of reasons. The low level of literacy, “lack of liberal middle class meant that the political basis for a smooth functioning of the representative institutions set up by Constitutions was non-existent”, therefore it could only encouraged 15-20 percent of the population to participate in the parliamentary elections.<sup>24</sup>

Following the 1964 Constitution the houses of parliament were combined into one which was called The Mili Jirga (The National Council). The Mili Jirga was representing the entire nation. According to the 1976 Constitution (Daud Khan’s Presidency period) 50 percent of the members of the Mili Jirga were composed of farmers and workers, and they had to be nominated by parties and directly elected by people for the term of four years. The electoral system at that time was the same as of the 1964 Constitution. However, the last parliamentary election was held in 1969, under the 1964’s majority electoral system. The parliament was completely suspended following the April 1978 Communist seizure of power.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Election handbook, “Voting and campaigning for our future,” 2009.

<sup>22</sup> Afghanistan Constitution 1964, Article 42.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, Article 43.

<sup>24</sup> Grote Rainer, “Separation of Powers in the New Afghanistan Constitution”, *Zaory*, 64, 2004, 899.

<sup>25</sup> Katzman Kenneth, “Afghanistan: Politics, Elections and Government performance”, Congressional Research Service 2011, 1.



## The Present Afghan Electoral System

“After 2001, first the 1964 constitution was invoked to form a basis for the new regime; then, a Loya Jirga passed the new constitution.”<sup>26</sup> The 2004 Afghan Constitution introduced a bicameral parliament. The National Assembly (Parliament) consists of two houses Wolesi Jirga (House of the People) and Mishrano Jirga (House of the Elders). Members of the Wolesi Jirga are elected for five years by free, direct and secret ballot. The Afghan electoral law is pursuant to articles No 33 clause (1) and article 159 of the existing Afghan Constitution.<sup>27</sup>

There are 249 seats in Wolesi Jirga; the constitution stipulates the maximum number of 250 seats. Seats are distributed according to the size of population in each constituency. Each qualified Afghan can candidate himself or herself for presidential, parliamentary, provincial, and district council’s elections; Chief Justice, members of the Supreme Court and Attorney General cannot candidate themselves for presidential, parliamentary, provincial and district council elections as well as officials of armed forces (Ministries of National Defense and Interior Affairs and General Department of National Security) while in duty, unless they have resigned from their institutions (75) days before the holding of elections.<sup>28</sup> Candidates must be at least 25 years at the time candidacy.

According the 2004 Afghan Electoral Decree any Afghan Electorate who has completed eighteen years of age at the time of the election; who has Afghan citizenship at the time of registration and who is not deprived of any political and civil rights by an authoritative court as well as those who is registered in the voters registration list can vote in presidential, parliamentary and provincial councils elections.<sup>29</sup>

## Who Supports SNTV System and Why?

More than half of Afghanistan’s population embraces traditionalism, ethnic values, and Jihadi values.<sup>30</sup> However, political views have not yet been shaped all over the country. The predominance of ethnic values, Jihadi views and traditionalism among voters, narrows their choices in most of the constituencies, and voters mainly vote for the candidates whom they know and whose views they share. Consequently, in the 2005 parliamentary elections, ethnic affiliations, known personalities and religious affiliations, business relationships, and tribal and conservative ideologies were the basis of success for the individual candidates who won seats in the parliament.<sup>31</sup>

For this study it is important to evaluate the shortcomings and advantages of the current electoral system by analyzing the statements of interviewees from the particular ethnic groups, including groups with majority ethnic affiliations and ethnic minority status, in order to understand the extent to which the elected candidates and politicians approve of the current parliamentary electoral system.

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<sup>26</sup> Election handbook, op. cit.

<sup>27</sup> Afghanistan Electoral Decree 2004, Article 1.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, Article 13.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Members of Parliament and Politicians, Kabul, July 20-August 22, 2010.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Johnson, *ibid*.

### The Attitude of the MPs towards SNTV System

Many domestic politicians and members of international society, those who were working on the process of selecting an appropriate electoral system for the Afghanistan legislative elections, questioned the use of the SNTV system in the 2005 legislative elections on the grounds that “it would create a fragmented legislature”. The SNTV system proponents including the United States government, electoral authorities, and President Karzai unofficially provided a number of additional reasons for choosing the SNTV electoral system, “such as: ease of voter education and of voting; promotion of women by encouraging them to run as independents; and decreasing the power of parties that were dominated by warlords.”<sup>32</sup>

When the interviewees were asked to share their views about the choice of the current electoral system, they spoke of the absence of nation-wide political parties in the state. Hence, this issue was one of the main factors that caused them to be in favor of the current electoral system.<sup>33</sup> MP (A), who comes from a Pashtun ethnic background, affirmed that although the current electoral system (SNTV) was introduced through an electoral decree, he agreed with the implementation of this system. According to him, the system promotes individuals and gives them the political right to run as independent candidates. In other words, the current electoral system encourages talented individuals to share their knowledge and ideas with the society and receive its support. The MP asserted that Afghanistan had been witness to decades of fighting, and for the first time an electoral system was being introduced to Afghans within the context of democracy. Therefore, the entire process of voting in and holding elections was new for Afghans, and it was a first experience that achieved a successful ending by introducing the first functioning parliament for the state.<sup>34</sup>

Being supportive of the choice of the electoral system and its application in Afghanistan, another MP (B) with a Pashtun ethnic background suggested that the SNTV system is well-suited to Afghan society, as it reduces the incidence of ethnically charged issues and ethnic-based voting. He emphasized that it is difficult to trust the political parties, and that today the political parties in Afghanistan have been shaped and formed based on ethnic groupings and ethnic lines. Moreover, the MP mentioned that it is true that the current electoral system is rarely used and can create administrative problems for both voters and candidates; however, he expressed the opinion that as a candidate, he should be able to manage the problems and obstacles and should have the capacity to mobilize the voters in his constituency. According to him, the individuals’ agendas, ideologies, and plans are more interesting for the voters; since most of the population is illiterate, it is difficult to explain the role and the agendas of the political parties to them.<sup>35</sup>

The interviewees, or the MPs whose statements were in the favor of the elections under the SNTV system, were able to receive an adequate amount of votes in their own constituencies to be elected.<sup>36</sup> In most constituencies, a correlation exists between the largest ethnic group and the political group that has the majority. In other words, it was easy for the candidates to get more votes in constituencies where their own ethnic affiliation was dominant.

<sup>32</sup> The September 2005 Parliamentary and Provincial Council Election in Afghanistan, National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), 2006.

<sup>33</sup> Members of Parliament, Interview by author, Kabul, July 20- August 22, 2010.

<sup>34</sup> Mullah Malang, interview by author, Kabul, MP July 28, 2010.

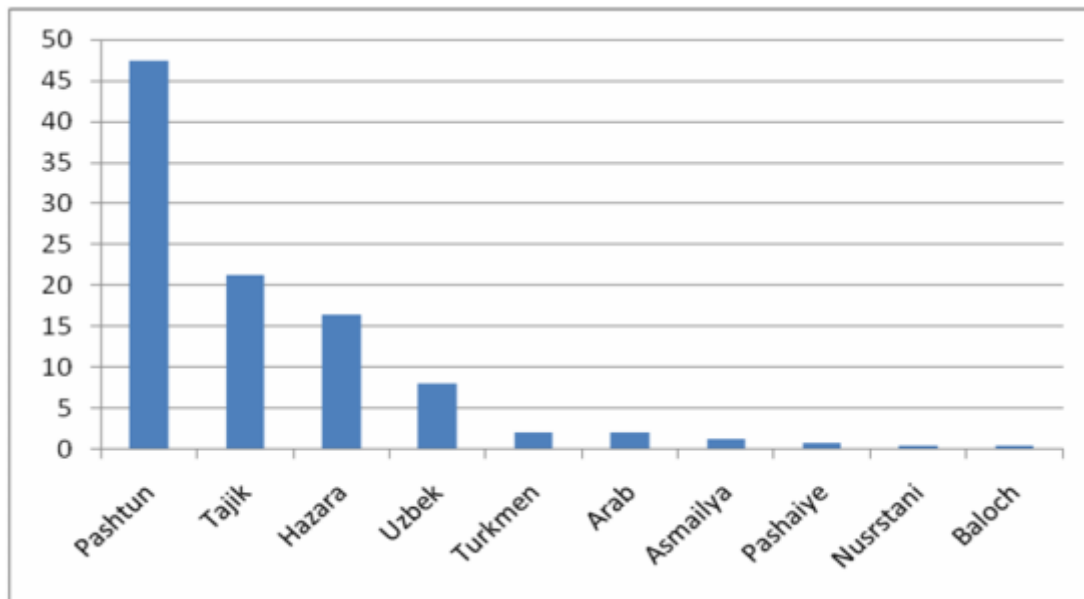
<sup>35</sup> Sayed Dawood Hashemi, interview by author, MP August 11, 2010.

<sup>36</sup> Wolesi Jirga and provincial council elections 2005 results, [www.iec.org.af](http://www.iec.org.af), accessed on October 20, 2010.

This consequence was different in larger constituencies such as Kabul; the candidates who were originally from other parts of the country and nominated themselves to run as candidates from Kabul province were not able to receive support from the voters of Kabul city.<sup>37</sup>

The chart 1 shows ethnic affiliation of MPs in the 2005 Wolesi Jirga by percentage.

**Chart 1:** Ethnic Affiliation of MPs



**Source of data:** The exact percentages listed in this chart were taken from Andrew Wilder, *A House Divided: Analyzing the 2005 Afghan Elections* (December 2005), p. 8.

MP (C) from the Pashtun ethnic group explained how the issue of ethnicity was important during the 2005 parliamentary elections among the electorates and how it affected the choices of the electorates and the careers of the candidates. For example, in one of the constituencies called Badghis, the Tajik ethnic group is the largest major ethnic group, and the second-largest ethnic group is the Pashtun. In one of the districts in Badghis named the Marchaq district, one of the candidates from the Turkmen ethnic group could not get enough votes. This was because he could get votes only from his own ethnic group, and his native ethnic group was the minority ethnic group in that district, as well as in the province. The MP asserted that in general the system should not be construed as being wrong for Afghanistan, and that ethnicity-based voting should not be counted as one of the problems of the system, as these types of issues have been rooted to the people's minds through the period of ethnic civil wars in Afghanistan. Therefore, at this moment any type of system will have these types of problems for the foreseeable future.<sup>38</sup>

One of the other MPs (D) from a Pashtun ethnic group who supported the choice of the current electoral system for Afghan legislature elections mentioned that the 2005 Afghan

<sup>37</sup> Interview with MPs and Political Scientists Kabul, July 20- August 22, 2010.

<sup>38</sup> Mullah Malang MP, interview by the author, Kabul, July 28, 2010.

Parliament has hosted representatives from different ethnic groups; she asserted that from one constituency, there are representatives from different ethnic groups in the parliament, and that this configuration exists because of the implementation of the current electoral system. According to her, although the current electoral system of Afghanistan is considered by other democracies to be a type of primordial system that weakens the role of political parties, the creation of political groups within the parliament will provide opportunities for groups and individuals who are interested in working under the title of a political group to form their own political views and ideologies. The interviewee added, it needs time to promote equal rights and have equal representation in the parliament or in any other political process of the country from all ethnic groups, “it took long time for US to introduce a president from the minority group” so people should be patient and should accept the rules and regulations that have been chosen by politicians.<sup>39</sup>

The SNTV system was chosen for the Afghanistan parliamentary election and provincial councils elections because it offers certain advantages. The two main reasons that the SNTV system was chosen for Afghan elections are as follows: First, the system is noted for its simplicity, and for a country with a high level of illiteracy, the system is more promising and realistic; and second, the system is easy to explain to the voters and easy for voters to follow.<sup>40</sup> Under the implementation of the SNTV system, representatives or MPs are more accountable to their provinces or constituencies rather than to their affiliated political parties, creating a direct relation between the representatives and the people.<sup>41</sup> One of the interviewees, MP (E), who has a Tajik ethnic background, stated that the decades of fighting in Afghanistan destroyed all the country’s political and administrative systems. “People of Afghanistan are frustrated from years of conflict, and they no longer trust the warlords and militias that were involved in all the country’s conflicts; the political situation in the country after 2001 taught the people of Afghanistan to practice their political rights”. With the choice of the current electoral system, exercising these political rights became more feasible.

The MP pointed out that “the statements that were provided by the founders of the SNTV system in Afghanistan warned that the system would weaken the participation of militias and warlords in the parliament and the politics of Afghanistan, a notion that caused much of Afghani society to welcome the system”. The MP added that people are also attracted to the system because its organization allows everyone to vote, exercise their political rights, and choose their preferred candidate.<sup>42</sup>

The Afghan presidential electoral decree states, “Elections shall be conducted on the basis of free, secret, universal, and direct ballots.”<sup>43</sup> Therefore, the SNTV system should be applied in a way that supports the articles of the decree. Generally, the SNTV system does not translate to the type of electoral system in which candidates should be independent or should not have party affiliations; in the context of Afghanistan, the aim was to create an environment of direct relations between the electorates and the candidates. In the mind of one of the MPs

<sup>39</sup> Shukria Barakzai, interview by author, Kabul, MP August 15, 2010.

<sup>40</sup> Gathia and Hananuntasuk, “Afghanistan Ushering in a New Era of Democracy,” 17.

<sup>41</sup> Shenkai Karokhil, interview by author, MP and candidate for 2010 Parliamentary Election, Kabul, August 15, 2010.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with a female Member of Parliament, Kabul, July 20- August 22, 2010.

<sup>43</sup> Decree of the President of the Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan on the Adoption of Electoral Law, Article 2, Kabul, 2004.

(F) with a Pashtun ethnic profile, the current electoral system does not favor one particular group to win more seats than their population would suggest or cause one group to be overrepresented in the parliament.<sup>44</sup>

### Merits of the SNTV System for Candidates

During field research in Afghanistan, the statements of interviewees who were from the majority ethnic groups, both nationally and locally, were found to be more supportive of the elections under the application of the current electoral system. Their arguments and statements have shown that these groups were better able to benefit from the system than were other groups.

Another MP (G), who had a Pashtun profile, pointed to the SNTV system's relative simplicity for both voters and candidates to understand by explaining that the PR type of system is more complicated than the SNTV electoral system in the country's current situation, because the electorates still do not have the fundamental knowledge and capacity to understand the political parties' duties and responsibilities. The interviewee reported that as an individual candidate, he was able to manage his campaigns and mobilize his followers more effectively under the SNTV system. Consequently, the MP could get into the parliament by receiving a majority of the votes from his voters' side. Moreover, the MP added, the ethnic-based issues are strongly present in the nature and mind of the Afghan electorates; it is very difficult to ask a Pashtun voter to present his/her vote to a Tajik candidate unless the voter knows the candidate personally. The interviewee mentioned that his native ethnic group was the major ethnic group in the particular constituency where he was a candidate, and that all his votes came from the voters that shared ethnicity with him in that constituency.

The MP pointed out that there were candidates from other ethnic groups as well, but noted that the reason that they could not get enough votes was because they did not have many supporters in that province. If they had been able to nominate themselves as candidates from their own native provinces, their chances of winning seats in the elections would have been much stronger. The MP asserted that even for him it would be competitive and challenging to get enough votes if there were other candidates from the same ethnic group in the same constituency. Agreeing that ethnicity issues strongly influence the elections, the MP pointed out that his own ethnic group has other branches and partitions inside it, and that people from that group are easily recognized by their surnames. Hence, if there had been another candidate from one of those branches, then his votes would have been divided with that candidate, and if there had been more than two candidates, his chances of winning would have been slight.<sup>45</sup>

An MP (H) from the Hazara ethnic group profile noted that both the PR system and the SNTV system can be used in Afghanistan. Given Afghanistan's current situation, however, the SNTV system is more promising than the PR system because under this system minorities and majorities have the same rights: the right of participation and right of having represented in the political process. Pointing to his campaign activities under the implementation of the SNTV system, the interviewee declared that as an individual candidate he never felt that he was under pressure to adhere to a certain ideology or to follow the party line. The voters are interested in

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<sup>44</sup> Interview with MP and candidate for 2010 Parliamentary Election , Kabul, August 15, 2010.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with a male MP and candidate for 2010 parliamentary election, Kabul, July 20- August 22, 2010.

hearing and learning about personal programs and agendas. The MP claimed that his votes came not only from one particular ethnic group, but that he was able to receive votes nationwide. According to him, the chances of his receiving nation-wide votes would be lowered if the functioning electoral system were a party-based electoral system.

The MP added that the implementation of the current electoral system had provided him with the opportunity to describe his ideas directly to the voters. Hence, he was able to get support not only in terms of votes, but also in terms of financial support for campaign-related expenditures, such as the bills for printing companies that were publishing his campaign posters and campaign cards. Pointing to the above-mentioned issues, the MP emphasized that he never felt that the system created any obstacles during his electoral campaigns. Moreover, the MP asserted that the SNTV system does not have a problem, but opined that the Afghan electoral decree should have some limitations and certain conditions for candidates, as the conditions that exist in the decree do not cover all the areas and that “this is the result: that today we have unqualified people as candidates.” Although the interviewee was not the only candidate from the Hazara ethnic group in the Kabul constituency, he claimed that the electoral environment that was created by the application of the SNTV electoral system had allowed him to succeed in the electoral competitions.<sup>46</sup>

Another MP (I) from the Pashtun ethnic profile supported the choice of the current electoral system, pointing out that one of the strengths of the SNTV system is that the system is easier and more manageable than any type of PR system for Afghans, both voters and candidates. The system in general produced effective results. He cited the example of the ethnic combination in the Wolesi Jirga (Lower House), reporting, “Today inside the Wolesi Jirga we have representatives from all ethnic groups, and none of the ethnic groups are overrepresented in the parliament.” This configuration shows that implementation of the SNTV system created room for all major and minor ethnic groups to participate and have representatives. The MP acknowledged that the chances of fraud in the elections are greater, and that in fact there was fraud in the 2005 elections as well. He then mentioned other strength of the system: that the votes are not transferable to other candidates. If they were transferable, then candidates would not know the exact number of votes received by their counterparts or other candidates because the votes then would have been transferred to other candidates and the chances of abuse in the transferrable type of system are greater than in the current electoral system.

Pointing to the voters’ choices during the elections, the MP asserted that it is difficult to stop people or electorates from voting based on ethnic lines. The MP reported that in his campaigns he tried to encourage the voters toward national unity and asked them not to emphasize ethnic-based concerns and issues; however, he is aware that some people among the voters take these issues very seriously, and as a candidate he has to be more accurate in front of his followers and voters, especially those who share his ethnicity. He shared part of one of his campaigns and commented, “I had mentioned in one of my campaigns that if the voters can find another strong candidate rather than me, then their votes can go for him/her no matter if the candidate is from another ethnic group”.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with MP and candidate for 2010 parliamentary election, Kabul, August 18, 2010.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Member of Parliament and candidate for the 2010 parliamentary election, Kabul, August 11, 2010.

One of the Pashtun female MPs (J) also supported the current electoral system, and supported the PR system for the long term. She mentioned that although political parties and the choice of electoral systems are key elements in the consolidation of a democracy and play an important role in the politics of a country, the political situation in post-2001 Afghanistan required the immediate application of the SNTV system for the parliamentary elections.

Immediately after the conflict in Afghanistan had ended, there were no strong political parties to rely on. Therefore, the SNTV system was chosen as a better and more suitable option given the country's political situation. Pointing to the voters' characteristics, the MP mentioned that more than half of the electorates are uneducated, but nonetheless they have set up their own criteria for giving their votes to a particular candidate. The MP explained that she was elected because prior to her candidacy she had worked with a refugee camp in Pakistan as well as an activist for women; the majority of her votes came from these two segments of the society.

The MP added that the issue of ethnicity is very hot and sensitive among the voters. During her electoral campaigns she had visited a small village where the majority of the residents in that village were not from the Pashtun ethnic group or did not share ethnicity with her. The village residents requested that she provide financial help for their school, and they promised to support her in the election by voting for her. Soon after the election results came out, the MP found out that she had not gotten a single vote from that village. The MP asserted that these sorts of issues and problems should not be blamed on the SNTV system because it is difficult to guarantee voter behavior, especially in a country where ethnic-based issues have been one of the core reasons for the continued conflicts in the country, and especially when the electorates do not share ethnicity with the candidate and do not have enough information about the candidate.

The interviewee mentioned that another reason that she was able to win in the elections was her gender status. She explained, "While I was conducting meetings with the voters, I found that they trust a female candidate more than a male candidate." Therefore, she was able to manage very well under the application of the current system as an individual candidate rather than as a representative of a political party. According to her, if she had been nominated by a party and the head of party was a man, then she would not have had the chance to explain herself to the society and introduce her ideas. This is because today members of political parties are most often known by the name of the leader of the party, rather than by their own actual names. The MP concluded that if Afghanistan is to have an effective parliament, political parties will need to be involved; she admitted that in the long term, the PR system should be introduced for supporting political parties and introducing a strong parliament. But in the context of the current situation in Afghanistan, her preference was for the SNTV system rather than for any type of PR system.<sup>48</sup>

A Tajik profile MP, (K), when asked about his opinion of the SNTV system, replied that it is better to have something than to have nothing, and that while the current electoral system has its weaknesses, there is no better option than this system at this moment. Additional strong points of the system, the MP explained, are that the SNTV system is simple to understand and that it encourages individuals' agendas. Therefore, under this system he was able to manage his plans and programs in a more appropriate way. The MP added that when

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<sup>48</sup> Interview with a female MP and candidate for the 2010 parliamentary election, Kabul, August 15, 2010.

he arose as an independent individual candidate from among his society, he was able to receive their support, and at the same time his followers and electorates were working hard on his campaigns.

Referring to the voters' characteristics during the elections, the MP asserted that the people of Afghanistan still have bad images and memories of the 30 years of conflict in their minds, and now they know who is wrong and who is right. According to the MP, the voters supported him because he didn't have any affiliations with any party or any militia or warlord groups. The candidates that had financial power and well-known personalities in their constituencies had better chances of winning than the other candidates. The MP noted that other strength of the SNTV system is that it evokes a kind of creativity in the individuals, encouraging them to explore their ideas and plans for the society and for the country's well-being, as well as to take advantage of the political rights that have been provided to them. The MP concluded that, with all its good points, the SNTV system seemed to be more supportive for those who have enough resources to spend during their campaigns.

## **Who Opposes the SNTV System and Why?**

### **Arguments Against the SNTV System**

Field research done in Kabul, Afghanistan in 2010 showed that MPs and politicians appreciated using the SNTV system for Afghanistan's first post-war parliamentary election in 2005. However, a number of interviewees (MPs) from the national minority ethnic groups and local minority ethnic groups discussed their concerns about using the system for future elections, pointing to its shortcomings as revealed during the 2005 elections. The interviewed MPs agreed that the choice of the SNTV system does not guarantee fairness for minority groups, as there is less chance for a candidate from a minor ethnic group to win a seat, unless he/she has support from a party or a particular group. The MPs who were from ethnic groups that were in the minority both nationally and locally mentioned that introducing the SNTV system increased the level of tension among ethnic groups because the country is still emerging from deadly ethnic conflicts, and each particular ethnic group wants to secure seats in the parliament.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, the interviewed MPs and experts explained that they supported the PR system rather than the SNTV system for the long term because the PR system can produce more proportional results, since voters will be asked to vote for a party rather than for a particular individual, providing opportunities for the creation of multi-ethnic-based parties. The PR system can bring a unity to the country as a whole.<sup>50</sup>

### **Drawbacks of the SNTV for Candidates**

The assumption that the SNTV system benefits individual candidates is misleading; well-organized parties that can control the way their supporters vote can make effective use of the system, and in the case of Afghanistan, the system could end up advancing militias' lead parties. The system encourages candidates to push local, tribal, and ethnic agendas rather than national programs and agendas.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Interview with Members of Parliament, Kabul, July 20-August 22, 2010.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Members of Parliament and Political Scientists, Kabul, July 20-August 22, 2010.

<sup>51</sup> Andrew Reynolds, Lucy Jones, and Andrew Wilder, "A Guide to Parliamentary Elections in Afghanistan," Afghanistan Research Evaluation Unit 2005, 7.



MP (L), with a Hazara and former Mujahidin background, when asked for his view about the practicality of the SNTV system in Afghanistan and its weakness in the elections mentioned, offered the opinion that, although today Afghanistan is equipped with all modern systems and technologies, it has unfortunately chosen a rare electoral system that is one of the oldest used by democratic countries. Although this MP got the most votes in the election of 2005, he expressed his concerns regarding the proportionality of the system in practice. Large numbers of votes are wasted under the SNTV system; under this system, despite having the majority of the votes, only one candidate can be elected, whereas under a different system such a large number of votes would bring more MPs to the parliament. The MP explained, “I received the highest number of votes in the 2005 election, but if the system were well-organized or a PR type of system, we would have been able to bring more MPs from the Hazara ethnic group to the parliament with that high number of votes.”

An additional disadvantage of the system is that under the SNTV system, once the candidate has been elected, there is no guarantee of what his or her position in the parliament will be—whether he/she belongs to an opposition group or will be in favor of government. This means that the individual agendas of MPs easily can be targeted by either side. Moreover, the chances of winning for educated candidates are low in the elections under this system, because most of the uneducated candidates have vast resources; they can spend money and treat voters on a mass scale (for example, via distribution of clothes and food, building of mosques, supplying of necessary aid, and so forth) to buy votes. The MP mentioned that he was elected because he was the best-known person among his own ethnic group, and his ethnic group was the major ethnic group in the constituency. According to him, the SNTV system encourages ethnic-based voting in the country, as most of the voters prefer to vote for the candidates with whom they have personal relationships or share ethnicity.<sup>52</sup>

Institutionally, a drawback of the SNTV system is its inability to distribute the majority of the votes between top candidates, said one MP (M) from the Tajik ethnic group. In such a case, this system is like a lottery in terms of candidates’ getting enough votes. MP (M) pointed out that the biggest disadvantage of the system for the candidates during the 2005 parliamentary election was its administrative weakness; many candidates had multiple symbols in front of their names that had been assigned to them by the election office, and since the system encouraged a huge number of candidates to run for election, the quality of the printing on the ballot papers was not high and their symbols were not clear on the papers.<sup>53</sup>

More than half of the electorates of Afghanistan are uneducated, conservative, poor, and undemocratic. This type of electorate puts emphasis on financial power, social status and gender, and a candidate’s ethnic affiliation rather than on the candidate’s electoral programs and agendas. The SNTV system and the weak rules of the electoral decree have allowed this dynamic to flourish.<sup>54</sup> As a result, the parliament has been fragmented because parliamentarians have been divided into groups of pro-government MPs, opposition MPs, and MPs with no clear alignments.

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<sup>52</sup> Haji Mohaqiq, Interview by author, Kabul, M P and candidate for the 2010 parliamentary election, August 18, 2010.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with MP and candidate for 2010 parliamentary election, Kabul, August 11, 2010.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with expert and political science professor, Kabul, August 15, 2010.

The table below shows the estimated factional alignment of MPs in the 2005 Wolesi Jirga of the parliament.

**Table 2:** Factional Alignment in the 2005 Lower House

<b>Estimates of Factional Alignment in the Wolesi Jirga (Lower House)</b>	
	<b>Seats</b>
Total Pro-opposition	84
Total Pro-government	81
Total Non-aligned or no clear faction alignment	84
<b>Total</b>	<b>249</b>

**Source:** Andrew Wilder, *A House Divided: Analyzing the 2005 Afghan Elections*, 10.

Political parties are one of the key elements of civil societies. In order to sustain democracy in Afghanistan, it will be necessary to introduce a mixture of the SNTV system and the PR system, said an MP (N) with a Tajik ethnic background. Pointing to the problems of elections conducted using the SNTV system in Afghanistan; he asserted that one of the main problems is that political parties have reduced chances of forming under the implementation of this system. For the first five years of its existence the Afghan parliament was in distress because the role of political parties inside the parliament was weak and the parliament was not able to shape political groups based on political agendas and political ideologies inside it, a problem that is traceable to the type of electoral system used in the elections.

Continuing to discuss the SNTV system, the MP enumerated the four main disadvantages that could be the result of using this system: “(i) The SNTV system supports individuals, not political parties; (ii) The elected individuals get into the political issues rather than working to represent the people; (iii) The chances of interference from the government side in the parliament are increased; and (iv) The chance of winning seats for those who do not merit them and do not represent the people is greater.” All four of these problems were highlighted in the 2005 parliamentary election. There is a need to move from the SNTV system to the PR system with the support of international society, according to this MP. The Afghan Constitution officially supports the political parties, but in practice political parties do not play any important role. The government benefits from the SNTV system, and the government wants to have a fragmented parliament so that it can impose its decisions on the parliament.<sup>55</sup>

Taking part in the 2005 parliamentary election was a new experience for both voters and candidates, and candidates’ personalities played an important role in the election. Personal backgrounds, Jihadi backgrounds, political backgrounds, ethnic affiliations, and political party affiliations played a significant role in the elections. Therefore, the 2005 Lower House is a mixture of all these elements. Among these backgrounds and ties, ethnic affiliation is the issue

<sup>55</sup> Younus Qanoni, Interview by author, Kabul, MP and candidate for 2004 Presidential Election, August 12, 2010.

that has the strongest negative impact on the parliament's decisions and the greatest negative impact on society. Local ethnic groups that were in the minority in their constituencies had problems securing seats. However, the Afghan parliament elected in 2005 does consist of representatives from all ethnic groups, although the ethnicity of candidates was one of the criteria for the electorates. Nonetheless, the smaller ethnic groups would have more representation through a political party-based electoral system because the goal of a political party-based system is to introduce ideologies and agendas rather than personalities.<sup>56</sup> The MP concluded that all these flaws will be corrected by the implementation of the PR system and giving opportunity to the political parties.

Concerning the shortcomings of the SNTV system in the 2005 parliamentary election, MP (O) mentioned that the elections under the SNTV system were inappropriate and had its weaknesses. The MP added that the SNTV system had divided villages, districts, and streets. Votes were cast according to the streets, districts, and even avenues with which the candidates had affiliations. People voted for a candidate stating, "He is from our avenue" or "He is from our district." This situation shows that the political knowledge of electorates is weak and that the SNTV system in Afghanistan, instead of providing opportunity for participating in the political process, encourages the voters to participate in the process as a means of supporting personalities rather than ideologies and agendas. The reason that in some of the constituencies the minority ethnic group of that particular constituency could get votes was that the local major ethnic groups had more than one candidate, and the votes were divided among those candidates; but in general, the results from most of the constituencies show that the local ethnic groups that are in the majority get all the seats allocated for that particular constituency.<sup>57</sup>

A female MP believed that the SNTV system is not supportive of female candidates in the current political situation of Afghanistan. According to her, in the election campaigns under the implementation of SNTV system, women candidates had to bear all economical and logistical costs by themselves. Participating in the 2005 parliamentary election was a new experience, and after the five-year absence of women in the politics and social activities of the country, it was challenging for women to pursue election campaigns as their male counterparts did. Thus, in order to manage the campaigns and be successful in the electoral competition, most of the female candidates made their affiliations with the strong and influential political parties, such as former political parties and local famous personalities that shared ethnicity with and received support from those parties.

This reality was in stark contrast to what policy makers and officials stated that the system was more likely to support women candidates. The MP asserted that most of the female MPs in the parliament are not aware of legal and political terms; they lack relevant knowledge, are not able to participate in decision making, and are not sure of their votes during the sessions. She added that although she did not have any party affiliation or ties with famous local personalities, she was able to manage her campaign and was able to receive enough votes to win, because her ethnic group was in the majority in her constituency. The

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Dr. Kabir Ranjbar, MP and candidate for 2010 Parliamentary Election, Kabul, August 10, 2010.

MP reported that therefore she organized her plans and programs in such a way that all her campaign activities took place in her native ethnic group's residential areas.<sup>58</sup>

The issue of ethnicity and ethnic divisions is rooted in the nature of Afghan society; the government is trying to consider this issue in its administrations in the center of the country and in the provinces, said an MP (Q) from the Hazara ethnic group. Giving examples, he mentioned that in the Bamyán province of Afghanistan, Hazara ethnic groups constitute the majority of the population; in the province's administration, all of the leading staff members are Hazaras. Likewise, in the 2005 parliamentary election and the 2004 presidential election, electorates cast their votes based on ethnic lines. This was the case because the voters lacked political information and because the electoral system did not provide the opportunity for either candidates or voters to exercise their political rights based on the tenets of democracy. This meant that in the elections of Afghanistan, ideologies, agendas, and political parties remained on the sidelines.<sup>59</sup>

Adding to the weak points of the electoral system, the MP mentioned, is that the SNTV system is not supporting democracy in Afghanistan; instead, it is providing opportunity to the powerful people with vast resources and little knowledge to represent the people, besides which the system discourages the role of professionalism in the politics of the country. The MP asserted that the electorates should be provided with a great deal of political information during the campaigns and prior to the elections, and that this is possible when the political parties arise and start introducing the agendas, ideologies, and programs of the party. Under the SNTV system, individuals conducted campaigns and introduced themselves to the voters with the aim of supporting voters' rights in the parliament of the country. The candidates and the electorates in Afghanistan do not understand the real concept or role of their parliament. Therefore, everyone is trying to get into the parliament, whether through legal processes or through illegal avenues such as fraud. In such a case, if the system is strong and limits the choices of voters based on the best agenda and programs, the chances of supporting unqualified candidates would decrease.<sup>60</sup>

Before the 2005 parliamentary election in Afghanistan, the officials claimed that the country was not ready for a party-based electoral system because of the existence of former ethnic-based political parties, said an MP (R) from the Tajik ethnic group in her interview. Therefore, according to the officials, the SNTV system was preferable. The MP said however, the parliament resulting from the SNTV system is weak because it is fragmented. The 2005 parliament is divided along ethnic lines, and each MP in the parliament supports and represents a particular ethnic group, not the nation as a whole. Adding to the criticism of the electoral system, the MP mentioned that the current system is not suitable for Afghanistan, because the Afghani people still do not have the capacity and ability to elect their representatives by themselves. "In Afghanistan," she explained, "we have militias, warlords, and some people with access to large resources like businessmen; so people flocked to them

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<sup>58</sup> Fawzia Naseryaar, interview by author, Kabul, MP and candidate for 2010 Parliamentary Election, July 25, 2010.

<sup>59</sup> Abbas Noyan, interview by author, Kabul, MP and candidate for 2010 Parliamentary Election, August 11, 2010.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid*

and by receiving incentives, they sold their votes to them without knowing what the result would be in the future.” Therefore these candidates can get more votes than other candidates.<sup>61</sup>

## Conclusion

This study showed that ethnic fragmentation has been singled out as one of the reasons for political instability in Afghanistan, and the choice of electoral system affects that dynamic. The research showed that the application of the SNTV system to large multiple-member districts causes a mismatch between the system of candidate choice and electorate size.

The critical political situation and the absence of nationally-based political parties in the country post 2001 helped the state and officials to support their arguments for the choice of the SNTV system as being suitable for the parliamentary elections. As the arguments in the two previous sections showed, in the unstructured political situation of Afghanistan, the choice of the SNTV system was one of the only suitable options and has been supported by the majority in the country. The application of the SNTV system, given the large number of constituencies and the absence of political parties in Afghanistan, offered the opportunity for a large number of individuals to run for seats in the parliamentary elections.

Holding the elections under the SNTV system limited the role of political parties in the elections, but brought forth individuals with different political tendencies, and some with no specific agenda, who struggle for access to the powerful party, whether it is the president’s party or the opposition group. In other words, each member of the parliament has a different perception of the nature and extent of his/her power, creating instability in the parliament. Consequently, in this type of parliament, the parliamentarians emphasize financial and economic resources, their own characteristics, and their status rather than national programs, policies, and social interests. In general, the distribution of the responses shown in the main sections of this paper suggests that the largest ethnic group in the constituency overwhelmingly benefit from the disproportional advantage emanated from the current system (or the mismatch between the voting system and constituency size). Under proportional representation, the relationship between majority/minority status and perceived benefit from the electoral system would be less clear cut. The relevance of the advantages of the electoral system for particular ethnic groups and the level of support from the particular ethnic groups for the system are clearly supported by the current findings.

An implication of the research is that, in the current situation of Afghanistan, both the proportionally representative (PR) electoral system and the single non-transferable vote (SNTV) electoral system should be taken into account in further elections to provide an opportunity for both collective ideologies and individual ideologies, until the time that collective ideologies or political parties become politically and democratically strong in the country.

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<sup>61</sup> Interview with MP and candidate for the 2010 parliamentary elections, Kabul, July 25, 2010.

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