Book Review

Investigating Corruption in the Afghan Police Force: Instability and Insecurity in Post-Conflict Societies

By Danny Singh
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Reviewed by Leighann Spencer

Police corruption can hinder development and negate peace processes; a glaring statement given the August 2021 fall of Afghanistan to Taliban control. One might say that hindsight is 20/20. Yet as Danny Singh shows throughout this book on police corruption in Afghanistan, the warning signs were there. The past twenty years of international intervention had placed anti-corruption measures on its agenda. However, the rapidly executed neoliberal model of post-conflict reconstruction underscored by Western connotations of corruption engendered an environment where the phenomenon reigned. Danny Singh thus illustrates the country-specific drivers and manifestations of corruption to frame future prevention strategies in Afghanistan and other post-conflict states.

This contextual analysis is well situated within the criminological literature, starting from the definitions and frameworks of corruption through the familiar question: a few bad apples or a rotten orchard? By examining the types of corruption, from the low-level 'grass-eater' acts of petty bribes to the higher-level 'meat-eater' acts of selling police posts or planting evidence, it becomes apparent that the answer depends on the circumstances. Regardless of whether it is an individual or organisational problem, corruption can affect the legitimacy of a police force, and by extension, the legitimacy of the state.

Given the impact of police corruption, chapter 2 breaks down the common prevention strategies, such as Commissions of Inquiry, institutional reform, community policing and the input of civil society, pay reform, rotation strategy and training. Such strategies have achieved some success in places like New York and, in Australia, New South Wales. However, the author is sceptical of these strategies alone and, as shown by chapter 3, especially within the context of post-conflict states. More pertinent case studies of Iraq and Haiti reveal the difficulties of corruption prevention during internationally driven neoliberal post-conflict reconstruction. This is particularly the case in cases of counterinsurgency, where police become militarised and "corruption buys peace" (55).

This is evident, for exmaple, with reference to the case of the Afghani post-conflict reconstruction era. The 2001 Bonn Agreement on re-establishing government institutions saw political bargaining with warlords, and security sector reform prioritised the military and police with a disregard for the justice sector in upholding the rule of law. The combination of German-led police reform with a focus on civil service, and USA-led police reform with a focus on
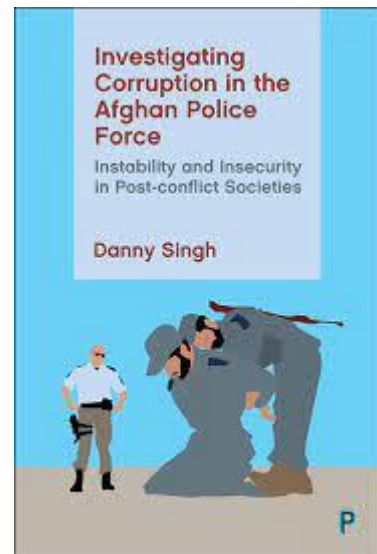
counterinsurgency, left the Afghan police with an ambiguous mandate and insufficient training. Although the country had a legacy of patronage politics, intervention exacerbated competition and favouritism. The fact that approximately 55% of the Afghan population remained in poverty, including police recruits who were poorly paid yet risked their lives, was a further problem towards post-conflict reconstruction.

By 2019, corruption within the Afghan police and wider state institutions persisted. Concerningly, the Taliban used this to their advantage, painting the state as illegitimate and offering alternative security. Some citizens turned to vigilantism as a third security option. To address the phenomenon beyond the Western setting, Danny Singh assesses the drivers of corruption within the Afghanistan context. This includes economic and political drivers, which can be drawn from the aforementioned post-conflict reconstruction shortfalls. Moreover, he utilises a social constructivist perspective of cultural drivers: "corruption is also subjective, like deviance" (122).

Through interviews with representatives of Afghan ministries, non-governmental organisations and police, chapter 7 illustrates various the prevalent drivers and kinds of police corruption. Economic and political drivers have seen patronage-based recruitment and state capture by the drug industry on a grand scale. Culturally, most respondents considered individual petty bribery as socially acceptable, termed *rishwat* which relates to a proverb around efficiency. Interestingly, the common-in-the-West noble cause corruption was not found in Afghanistan; a lack of emotional investment saw no common cause to fight for. Yet it was shown that police culture, specifically the on-the-job socialisation and internal solidarity, in addition to minimal accountability, allowed corruption to go unfettered.

Indeed, the Afghan police and wider state institutions are a 'rotten orchard'. However, the types of corruption must be distinguished. There is the survival-based *rishwat*, and then there is the high-level *fasad* (the dirty) which compromises institutional legitimacy. This book concludes with contextual, evidence based anti-corruption strategies for both types as grass-eating has been known to lead to meat-eating. These are presented as necessary for post-conflict reconstruction and combating Taliban resurgence. Despite its foreboding undertones, Danny Singh's book provides crucial insight into the events in Afghanistan, and a comprehensive approach to addressing police corruption in post-conflict states.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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