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Police Corruption and Political Legitimacy of Ashraf Ghani's Government in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the consequences, and extent of corruption in the Afghan police under the rule of Mr. Ashraf Ghani. Since the government in Afghanistan weakened by widespread corruption after 2014, and the people's trust in the government has always decreased. Therefore, internal legitimacy has also decreased, opening the space for the growth of anti-government groups, and ultimately leading to the collapse of the system. This study is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with 20 people, including academics, businesspersons, civil society activists, and government officials, through a qualitative study. According to the interviewees, the lack of uniform implementation of laws, weak leadership, and lack of specialized training, low salaries, and political interference were the main factors for the growth of corruption in the police department at that time. Preventing political interference, specialized training, permanent supervision, and uniform implementation of laws can rebuild trust in society.

KEYWORDS

Corruption, Legitimacy, Police Force, Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, Governance, Political

Introduction

When examining the corruption of government officials, history testifies that very few governments could be consider corruption-free. However, the scale of corruption varies from country to country. More importantly, corruption reduces the lifespan of governments by eroding public trust in government. If this continues, people will even see the positive performance of the government with suspicion. Often, Corruption goes beyond the erosion of trust in government and can threaten the survival of the entire political system if it is more widespread. The developing or least developing countries often suffer from this menace. Corruption causes severe damage to political, social and economic structures and ultimately hinders progress and development in these countries. Afghanistan is no exception. In fact, it is an interesting case study to investigate how corruption erodes public trust in government and beyond. Afghanistan subsequently ranked as the second most corrupt country in the world after Somalia, during the period when Dr. Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai held the presidency. This report, published by Transparency International in 2016, reflected the bitter reality of a corrupt government and the way of life of the Afghan people under such a regime. From what we have said, it was concluded that the struggles and efforts of the government of Mr. Dr. Ashraf Ghani to suppress and control corruption had failed, and the spread of corruption in various sectors of the government had become apparent, and this corruption was not only political corruption but also included administrative, security and organizational corruption. Each of these, in turn, has led to instability and distrust in the social, economic and political sectors. One major example of the presence of corruption at the highest governmental and military levels was the case of (Association, 2016).

Corruption in the newly established Afghan government is growing and becoming systematic, and it appears that the anti-corruption laws enacted in the current year, 2006, are unable to control this widespread corruption. It must be note that such a situation is common in post-war countries; however, the fact that it poses a long-term threat to the republic and the political system of Afghanistan is an issue that must be taken seriously (Singh, 2016). The infiltration of corruption into the security and military institutions had become so severe that it can be said it eliminated any hope of combating this phenomenon. This situation allowed the government's opponents to take maximum advantage of the opportunity, weakening the position of the newly established Afghan republic after 2001, both domestically and internationally (Savage, 2007). Another factor that weakened the government was the presence of corruption at the highest levels of state authority, which created obstacles to the country's development and progress. Development projects were disrupted, and in many cases, the costs of these projects multiplied, making it impossible for the Afghan government to implement such plans (Ozdemir, 2018). Corruption had affected the Afghan government not only on a large and extensive scale but also in smaller matters, such as bribery, fraud, and other legal violations, which had almost destroyed the government's authority in the public eye. In remote areas, the government's presence had nearly diminished to zero, further deepening and intensifying the gap between the people and the state. For this reason, people turned to the government's opponents in search of justice and placed greater trust in them. (Bak, 2019). Another issue that accelerated the growth of corruption and damaged the trust between the government and the nation was foreign aid, which in many cases even reached the anti-government forces. This contributed to the continuation and intensification of the war, while the lack of transparency in the distribution of such aid was the main factor enabling the opponents of the government to gain access to it (RAF, 2012). From what has been discussed, it becomes evident that corruption was not limited to the government of Mr. Ashraf Ghani but also existed during the presidency of Mr. Karzai. To assess the level of corruption and public trust in comparison to the past and during Mr. Ghani's administration, one can refer to the elections of 2014 and 2019, which indicate a significant decline in public confidence toward the government. Corruption during Mr. Ghani's first term, following the 2014 elections, had increased to such an extent that voter turnout in the 2019 elections dropped by nearly six million, with only about two million people voting, whereas this figure in 2014 was approximately eight million. This situation reflected the coldest relationship between the state and the people, indirectly showing that the public had withdrawn their support from the Afghan Republic government and were, in a way, calling for a change in the system.

In this study, we examine the growth and spread of corrupt practices and agents in government agencies, especially in the security and military sectors, especially the police department, which are considered the primary enforcers of the law. This study identifies how corruption has grown rapidly under the presidency of Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai. We also analyze the issue of social and political legitimacy in Afghanistan using a critical approach. We are also prepared to provide key insights and perspectives on the complexity of governance, social stability, and corruption as a structural and theoretical framework for a detailed understanding of the broad socio-political changes.

Literature Review

The abuse of power for the benefit of a party, movement, or even an individual is corruption, whether in the form of material benefits or money, and it causes deep and significant damage to the state. Even if the corruption is very small in amount, its consequences on society and the nation's trust in the state will be very strong, especially in the end. Therefore, it widens the gap between the government and its citizens, as the public expects law enforcement agencies to uphold justice impartially (Azami, 2009; Muzaffar, & Choudhary, 2017).

Domestically, security institutions, especially the police, are considered law enforcement and representatives of the state, whose task is to establish security and order in society. This role is very vital and valuable because it is directly related to the daily lives of citizens. Therefore, the police can be a mirror of the state in front of the eyes of the nation, and the people see the state in the bigger picture through this mirror (Irwin, 2009).

The consequences of corruption are very significant and very sensitive in all societies because it directly weakens the public trust of the nation in the government. Based on experiences and research conducted in different countries, it has been shown that for the sustainability of the government, the level of corruption must be reduced. Whenever the level of corruption in a society increases, public trust decreases, because a corruption-free government moves quickly in the development sector (Hatugimana, 2022; Muzaffar, et. al., 2023).

Therefore, if we want to have a stable government, balanced development, and a growing economy, we must cleanse law enforcement institutions of corruption and deal seriously with corruption in all cases. Corruption repeatedly destroys governments from within, prevents justice from being provided, and ultimately causes the government to lose its popular support. Even political parties will not be immune from the consequences of corruption (Tankebe, 2010; Muzaffar, et. al., 2024).

People are directly affected by the decisions of governments because governments are responsible for their citizens' security and welfare. Consequently, people trust their government to provide security (Boyce et al., 2001). In the context of Afghanistan, the erosion of government and ultimately the state's credibility can be attributed to various factors, with police corruption emerging as a critical factor.

Some scholars have argued that bribery, which has become commonplace among police forces, often skews legal outcomes in favor of those who pay more and undermines the integrated justice system every day (Singh, 2016). Others have pointed out broader capacity issues within the Afghan police service (Planty et al., 2013). The lack of a clear and fundamental definition of duty, the lack of equipment, personnel, professional and military training, a standard financial system, and the prevailing culture in some areas have hindered international interventions aimed at reforming the Afghanistan National Police (ANP) (Planty et al., 2013; Batool, et. al. 2023).

Some studies have shown that the main factor in the failure to reform Afghanistan's security institutions, despite huge investments, is the lack of recognition and distinction between the tasks of the army and the police. This has caused both agencies to suffer from the lack of precise plans and effective strategies (Murray, 2007). Moreover, local powers, or so-called other islands of power in the regions, and their

influence on the duties of military and government departments have lowered people's expectations of police performance. In some ways, people have become skeptical of the police's ability, as if they can no longer enforce the laws (Deglow et al., 2021).

The failed and corrupt police in Afghanistan have many reasons, including a lack of transparency in government policies and a lack of adequate salaries, mechanisms, and accountability, which have even led to moral abuse. The non-standard use of powers has caused irregularities and injustice (Wardak, 2019). The growth of corruption in military and security agencies poses a very big challenge for a post-war state. It weakens the rule of law and increases inequalities, gradually becoming a serious problem and getting out of control (Checchia et al., 2012).

Some studies have highlighted the need to fight such corruption in Afghanistan. The fight against corruption must be comprehensive, and a one-sided fight does not yield the desired results. For example, relying only on the formulation of an anti-corruption law will not solve the problem. However, if, while enacting anti-corruption laws, anti-corruption departments and an income tax department are established, the scope of corruption will be closed from several directions. The officer tainted with corruption will understand that his assets are under the supervision of several departments and will not engage in corruption (Punch, 2000; Singh, 2022).

Sustainable reforms must address the root causes of corruption, such as low wages and institutional weaknesses within security forces, particularly the police (Gutierrez, 2016). Scholars and researchers in political science and criminology believe that corruption is not merely an administrative problem but is directly related to society and public trust in the government. This issue further intensifies the fragility of the relationship between the state and the people in Afghanistan. Corruption within law enforcement institutions is a serious problem for all governments, particularly for developing and newly established states (Newham, 2011).

Corruption is a deep and very complex issue that governments around the world are grappling with. To eradicate it, serious effective measures must be taken, including legal and judicial reforms, as well as comprehensive professional and technical training for law enforcement and government officials. These actions must strengthen ethical issues, including commitment to the nation and country, in all relevant institutions. The judiciary is the main representative of the law and its implementer, so it is necessary to seriously pursue the reforms implemented in this institution and make more efforts to ensure justice in all cases and that there is no difference between citizens under the law (Quah, 2019).

Creating a government free from various forms of corruption requires implementing a series of reforms in government institutions, raising awareness, strengthening moral values, promoting social reforms, and providing effective and modern training for government members, especially police officers (Al-Muhairi, 2008). For the government to be as effective as possible in fighting corruption and creating reforms, it is better to consult and exchange views with social, civil society, and other government institutions. This can lead to the supervision of popular institutions and the support of allied governments, significantly increasing the level of effectiveness (Masake, 2023).

Based on the analysis conducted, this study has examined the impact of corruption and its extent in the administration of Mr. Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai, especially

in the police departments. The main objective of this study is to analyze the relationship between public trust and corruption in government departments, especially the police. Previous studies have not addressed this issue and have not examined police corruption during Mr. Ghani's administration, making this a very important topic. Moreover, given that the fall of the system is also a subject of discussion during this period, the importance of this study becomes even more substantial.

Material and Methods

In this study, we examine the issue of corruption within the Afghanistan police force and its implications for governance in Afghanistan through a qualitative research design. Qualitative research proposes an in-depth study of the subject's background, identification of fundamental factors, and comprehensive interpretation of the data. This method allows researchers to make the most of the diversity, nuance, and depth of participants' perspectives and experiences, and to articulate their comprehensive understanding with words and explore causes (Creswell, 2013).

The main factor behind assessing the causes and analyzing the facts about corruption is to understand which parts of the government have been hit the most by this issue or which institutions should be kept away from corruption so that the pillars of the government become more potent among the people.

In this study, we interviewed a large number of government officials, businesspeople, academics, and members of civil society to delve into the causes of corruption and assess its impact on the legitimacy of the government of Dr. Ashraf Ghani. A total of 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with these four groups. These research participants were chosen through the snowball sampling method, which is the most appropriate sampling method for this kind of study (Parker et al., 2023).

The groups selected for interviews share several unique characteristics that have led to their selection and the scrutiny of law enforcement interactions. The first group has both been involved in and witnessed the law enforcement process. Civil servants, as part of the government, are constantly exposed to the issues that are a major factor in the lack of comprehensive law enforcement (Campbell et al., 2020). The second group is businesspersons who withstand the worst of police corruption because of their economic status. Academics and civil society members, selected to reflect on this issue, provided in-depth insights into the matter. These diverse groups represented diverse perspectives on the issue and, therefore, enriched the analysis of this study.

The site of the study was the capital of Afghanistan, Kabul. Kabul is not only the largest city and center of governmental power but also represents the ethnic, economic, and social diversity of Afghanistan. Therefore, it was the most appropriate site for this research.

Six-step framework is used to analyze and evaluate thematic data. The structured help of this approach guides the analysis of qualitative data so that the identification of topics is more precise, and the interpretation is expressed clearly and understandably for the reader (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Diversity of Perceptions of Political Legitimacy in Afghanistan

The first and most important finding of this study shows that the interviewees and the Afghan people do not have the same opinion on political legitimacy and have many differences. Research participants of this study interpreted political legitimacy through institutional, structural, good leadership, democracy, and foreign intervention, which indicates the complexity and multi-polarity of the country's political environment.

Abdul Maihan Sarwari, a social activist, puts it in this way:

"Legitimacy can be achieved for the government through two channels: first, the political legitimacy of the system and government, and second, the legitimacy of high-ranking government officials, politicians, and rulers. The legitimacy of the government is achieved by establishing an impartial legal system. On the other hand, legitimacy for political rulers has deep roots in leadership's worldview, legal awareness, higher education, social wisdom, commitment to national and state interests, support for popular institutions, and democracy (A. M. Sarwari, personal communication, November 20, 2023).

Mr. Sarwari's view divides political legitimacy into two parts: the legitimacy of the system and of high-ranking individuals who work in different parts of the government. He believes that the legitimacy of governance comes from a properly structured and transparent system, while the legitimacy of rulers and political leaders is based on their genuine commitment to democracy, national interests, and continuous and effective interaction with the people.

Salim Hashimi, a former government employee, emphasizes the role of external (foreign) factors in political legitimacy and notes that this has been one of the most serious obstacles to the fight against corruption. He argued:

"External interference in the police department was considered a major challenge in the fight against corruption in the Afghanistan police department, and the countries supporting the government somehow had access to and interfered in reforms, promotions, the determination of posts, and other internal affairs. Such interventions undermined international standards and the principles of Afghanistan's national sovereignty, leading citizens to perceive the government as lacking independence and, consequently, diminishing their trust in it (S. Hashimi, personal communication, December 5, 2023).

According to Mr. Hashimi, political legitimacy had been completely lost due to the interference of foreign actors and countries in Afghanistan's internal affairs. He believes that one of the main factors behind the collapse of the regime was external intervention. During Mr. Ghani's tenure, national independence had largely eroded, as almost all individuals occupying key and high-ranking government positions were influenced by foreign powers. This was something the Afghan people felt deeply, and it also became a factor that accelerated the process of the government's downfall.

Civil society activist Ahmad Khan emphasizes that political legitimacy is achieved based on the implementation of the people's wishes:

"Prioritizing the wishes of the people generates and strengthens legitimacy. Undoubtedly, an authoritarian regime seizes power and does not obey the wishes

of its people. Repressive regimes are not acceptable to the people, whether large or small, and this is precisely where they lose their stability and collapse over time. (A. Khan, personal communication, November 13, 2023).

Khan emphasizes the need to focus on democratic processes as the fundamental basis of the legitimacy of governance. He believes that systems that do not pay attention to the will of the people have no support in society and are unstable.

Dr. Ahmad Jawad Rahiq, a university professor, criticized the political legitimacy of the previous government by analyzing the past election process:

"The two-round election process in Afghanistan clearly demonstrates the level of legitimacy of the previous government, and it also answers the fundamental question of why the previous system fell in Afghanistan. There were many issues in the 2014 and 2019 electoral process that led to widespread fraud that ultimately did not produce the desired results. This aroused public dissatisfaction and even became the reason why the people were not with the government when foreign forces withdrew, and the government fell apart. In addition, the government was also facing other serious issues that caused the people's demands not to be met or to be postponed and made the government appear ineffective in the public eye (A. J. Rahiq, personal communication, November 15, 2023).

From Rahiq's comments, it is clear how widespread corruption was in electoral offices and how much corruption influenced the fate of a nation, which directly hurt security offices. He believes that the failure to fulfill electoral promises was, in a sense, an attempt to deceive the people, which ultimately questioned the government's political legitimacy and increasingly widened the gap between the state and the nation.

Corruption in the Police Department: Another Major Challenge to the Political Legitimacy of Dr. Ghani's Government

The second finding of this study is the impact of police corruption on the political legitimacy of the government, which consistently weakened the government. Interviewees considered the Afghan police department at the time to be corrupt, abusive, lacking transparency, bribe taking, and biased, directly undermining the government's authority in the public eye. Shakib Sharifzai, a prominent civil society activist, provides a detailed analysis of the government's anti-corruption efforts during Dr. Ashraf Ghani's tenure.

"I accept the efforts to fight corruption, and it is clear that every government does this for its survival, but the fact that the efforts were not effective and sufficient made the problem worse, not less. Establishing institutions such as the Administrative Reform Commission and the Supreme Oversight Office indicated the need for effective change. The unfair treatment of cases in the judiciary was another serious problem in the fight against corruption, as individuals with high political and financial support, who also constituted the largest number of corrupt people, closed their cases in the courts within a few days and were set free" (S. Sharifzai, personal communication, September 23, 2023).

Another research participant, Rashid Khan, frames corruption not merely as an administrative problem but as a systemic crisis that eroded the foundations of governmental legitimacy, paving the way for its downfall.

"Structural corruption and the government's inability to control it were the main reasons for the collapse of the republican system, which widened the gap between the people and the government every day and somehow humiliated the government in the eyes of the people" (J. Rashid, personal communication, November 28, 2023).

Civil society activist Mr. Ahmad Khan strongly criticized the government's failure in combating corruption and implementing reforms within military institutions, particularly the police, stating:

"The government did not merely fail in combating corruption; in many cases, it did not even make an effort to control it. Mr. Ashraf Ghani almost paralyzed this department by dismissing police experts and was so intent on exercising his power over the department that he even appointed district police officials himself. Moreover, even Mr. Ghani's own deputy admitted in one of his interviews that a person with mental problems and insufficient knowledge of the conditions and situation of the province was appointed as the police chief of the same province, which I (Amrullah Saleh), the First Vice President, was against. This shows that Mr. Ghani's team was involved in police corruption largely and from the very beginning, they wanted to turn the situation in favor of the Taliban. This, along with the issue of Code 91 and 92, which was the presidential financial code, was also full of corruption and devoid of transparency and accountability, showing that corruption at the lower levels originates from the presidency. Undoubtedly, when corruption is in the presidential palace, it is impossible to fight it" (A. Khan, personal communication, November 13, 2023).

According to Ahmad Khan, there was no serious will to fight corruption in Mr. Ghani's government, and in many cases, the main factor of corruption was the presidential palace. Therefore, basic and superficial education was not the answer to widespread corruption, causing the government to become weaker each day.

Similarly, civil society activist Ms. Zarafshan Aslami questioned the internal legitimacy of Mr. Ghani's government, considering it to lack political credibility:

"Corruption had penetrated the foundations and was damaging the structures of the government, and since the government lacked internal legitimacy and the people were tired of the continuation of such a situation, they did not stand by the government. The electoral process was so riddled with corruption and manipulation that it could no longer reflect the true will of the people. Even foreign intervention, particularly from the U.S. government, played a decisive role in appointing the president" (Z. Aslami, personal interview, November 15, 2023).

From Ms. Aslami's analysis, it can be concluded that corruption was not limited to the executive branch but had also infiltrated the government's policy process and fundamentally weakened its legitimacy.

Dr. Ahmad Jawad Rahiq, a professor at a university in Afghanistan, argued that the 2019 elections were a turning point in the failure and collapse of the Afghanistan government:

"The 2019 elections both highlighted and exposed the weakness of the government and showed in a way that the government no longer has supporters among the people and is doomed to failure" (A. J. Rahiq, personal communication, November 15, 2023).

Sharif Ahmad Bahrami, an Afghan businessperson, highlighted the human toll during Ashraf Ghani's tenure:

"Weak and improper governance during the time of Dr. Ashraf Ghani led to high casualties and financial losses, including the loss of thousands of young forces in unspecified wars, and it reduced people's trust not only in the government but even in democracy, which ultimately led to people not standing on either side" (S. Bahrami, personal interview, November 19, 2023).

University professor Noorwali Ahmadi stated:

"The result of Dr. Ashraf Ghani's government was a bitter and black tragedy for Afghanistan. He failed not only in fighting corruption, advancing reforms but even in expanding democracy" (N. Ahmadi, personal communication, November 19, 2023).

University lecturer Heshmatullah Firuz emphasized the symbolic role of police:

"If security agencies are corrupt, it suggests that the government is also corrupt, which directly undermines the people's trust in the government. This leads to diminishing support for the government among the populace, pushing it closer to isolation each day" (H. Firuz, personal communication, November 25, 2023).

Eng. Saeed Arif Sadat noted:

"There is no doubt that police corruption directly affects the people's morale and discourages them from supporting the government. If this trend moves in the opposite direction, the government will gain support among the people daily and everyone will be equal before the law" (Eng. S. A. Sadat, personal communication, October 7, 2023).

Obaid Ahmad Zarah stated:

"The only alternative to corruption can be the equality before law; this is where people see themselves in the body of the government because they understand that the government takes the rights of the oppressed from the oppressor, and this is what they sacrifice for" (O. A. Zarah, personal communication, October 1, 2023).

Mr. Bay Agha Sadat emphasized:

"Corruption exists in all departments, particularly within the security institutions and the police. I personally witnessed corruption within the police department several times, and for this reason, I did not want to support the previous government against its adversaries" (B. A. Sadat, personal communication, November 25, 2023).

Former Afghanistan government employee Omid Arya also endorsed this view:

"Several of my friends and colleagues left their jobs due to a lack of legal protections and the presence of internal corruption, with some even attempting to join the anti-government forces, succeeding in doing so. Due to rampant bribery, government employees who were far from home either were compelled to leave and migrate or aligned themselves with the opposition, while all anti-corruption institutions had failed to address the situation" (O. Arya, personal communication, December 8, 2023).

Social activist Abdul Rahman Sahil added:

"The lack of adequate salaries led the opposition forces to recruit low-ranking employees for their illegal activities. This resulted in two serious disadvantages: first, it damaged the government's image in the public eye, and second, it allowed the opposition to gain more influence in the government every day" (A. R. Sahil, personal communication, December 4, 2023).

University faculty member Ahadullah Momand noted:

"Governments that were determined based on the people's votes should be the most transparent governments because if the people see corruption, others will not trust the government and will not vote for it. This is exactly what happened during Mr. Ghani's government. In the following election, fewer than 2 million people out of Afghanistan's nearly 45 million population cast their votes, ultimately not supporting that government. The incident of August 21, 2021, then occurred" (A. Momand, personal communication, December 1, 2023).

A.M. Sarwari, a political analyst, identified the monopoly of power in the hands of Dr. Ashraf Ghani as a key factor in the government's failure:

"The monopoly of power in the hands of President Ashraf Ghani and his close circle has led to the weakening of state institutions. And this monopoly not only eroded the state's administrative structures but also led senior government officials to ignore and deviate from the laws" (A.M. Sarwari, personal communication, November 20, 2023).

In conclusion, all these views indicate that corruption during the government of Dr. Ashraf Ghani was not simply due to managerial weakness but also to issues such as the erosion of public trust, centralization of power, and ultimately, the lack of coordination and unbridled political system that led to its collapse.

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"Governments that were determined based on the people's votes should be the most transparent governments because if the people see corruption, others will not trust the government and will not vote for it. This is exactly what happened during Mr. Ghani's government. In the following election, fewer than 2 million people out of Afghanistan's nearly 45 million population cast their votes, ultimately not supporting that government. The incident of August 21, 2021, then occurred" (A. Momand, personal communication, December 1, 2023).

A.M. Sarwari, a political analyst, identified the monopoly of power in the hands of Dr. Ashraf Ghani as a key factor in the government's failure:

"The monopoly of power in the hands of President Ashraf Ghani and his close circle has led to the weakening of state institutions. And this monopoly not only eroded the state's administrative structures but also led senior government officials to ignore and deviate from the laws" (A.M. Sarwari, personal communication, November 20, 2023).

In conclusion, all these views indicate that corruption during the government of Dr. Ashraf Ghani was not simply due to managerial weakness but also to issues such as the erosion of public trust, centralization of power, and ultimately, the lack of coordination and unbridled political system that led to its collapse.

Conclusion

Widespread police corruption in Ashraf Ghani's government has serious consequences for the political legitimacy of his regime. Although Afghan research participants of this study differ on the meaning of political legitimacy, they all agree that police corruption has caused considerable damage to the legitimacy of Ashraf Ghani's fall. Although the fall of Ashraf Ghani cannot be attributed to a single factor of police corruption, the eroding public trust in government institutions was partially caused by corruption in state institutions such as the Afghan National Police.

Recommendations

The findings of this study show that police corruption can be tracked and controlled, but it needs to be implemented in some frameworks. Therefore, it is suggested that careful attention should be paid to reforming the education system and a permanent monitoring system should be established, while at the same time, management capacities should be strengthened. On the other hand, by teaching the importance of human rights and raising public awareness with comprehensive and balanced international cooperation, a country like Afghanistan can have a corruption-free police institution.

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