

The Role of the State

Using the example of Afghanistan discuss whether a state can be built without providing public goods. Feel free to disagree with the premise of the question.

Afghanistan: A State Founded on a Minimal Amount of Public Goods

An indicative statement regarding the use of public goods as a propellant for further state development and building in Afghanistan during the 1900's maintains, "While these groups [Afghani political figures] spoke of radical socialist change that would transform Afghanistan, their means of achieving this goal were the same as their royal predecessors': to control the state's assets and use its power themselves," (Barfield, 168). Essentially, during the 1900's, Afghanistan was attempting the implementation of public goods but arguably failed in every aspect other than in the realm of law and order and infrastructure: two necessary public goods to be a state and maintain a "monopoly of legitimate use of physical force in a given territory" (Weber, 170). Thus I disagree with the premise of the question that Afghanistan was built without providing public goods.

We begin our analysis with the public goods with which the Afghani regimes were so unsuccessful in providing. One integral example of a commonly assumed state-building public good is an education system. Afghanistan, however, consistently failed in making said education non-rival and non-excludable such as in the 1930's when "Hashim Khan made the delivery of modern education a key government goal, but the task was so overwhelming that even twenty years later the results were meager" (Barfield, 201). Some factors that led to the ineffectiveness of a state-wide education system include the exclusion of rural villagers and lack of funding that was instead focused on defense.

When it came to emphasizing state-wide defense, the one public good Afghani rulers did provide was law and order. Although Barfield indicates that "each succeeding regime had a weaker claim to political legitimacy" and that "regimes increasingly resorted to force to maintain their authority" (Barfield, 165), Afghanistan nevertheless had a sense of law and order. This was enhanced by the application of infrastructure in the state, specifically with the developments outlined in the constitution of 1923 that "laid the foundation for ambitious administrative, legal, financial, and social reforms," (Barfield 182), that included infrastructural basics such as "a new tax law, abolition of slavery, and the imposition of universal conscription," (Barfield, 183). This mobilization of taxes and conscription throughout the 20th century further exemplified Afghanistan's hold on law and order, if nothing else.

The World Bank synthesizes Afghanistan's political and economic relationship in a quotation regarding a Canadian and an Ivorian when it claims, "Government affected their lives only to the extent that it provided a handful of classic public goods, such as law and order and basic infrastructure, and collected taxes from them" (19). Similarly, it can be said that during the majority of the 1900's, specifically the period after 1929 when there was more political stability (Barfield, 169), developed public goods such as education, welfare, health care, and state-provided jobs were virtually nonexistent the state of Afghanistan.

In conclusion, it appears, as in the case of Afghanistan, that a state cannot be built without the fundamental public goods that help it maintain autonomy as a state; however, a state by no means must provide more than the basic ideals of law and order and infrastructure to maintain that autonomy... although the people would appreciate it.