Regime Collapse, Institutional Continuity, and the Risk of Fragmentation

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The modern international order increasingly confronts the challenge of managing political transitions in fragile or contested states while avoiding large-scale violence and regional destabilization. Debates surrounding regime change—whether externally induced or domestically driven—often emphasize normative goals such as accountability, representation, or ideological realignment. Less attention is frequently given to the structural conditions required for political transitions to consolidate rather than fragment. The collapse of the Islamic State of Afghanistan between 1992 and 1996 illustrates the dangers associated with sudden regime breakdown in the absence of institutional continuity and a monopoly over coercive force. This historical episode offers a cautionary framework for assessing contemporary discussions surrounding Iran, where external pressure and internal discontent are sometimes framed in terms of abrupt political transformation. Understanding the Afghan case requires examining how legitimacy, armed power, and institutional survival interact during moments of regime collapse.

Following the fall of President Najibullah's government in 1992, Afghanistan did not experience a conventional transfer of power but rather a rapid dissolution of central authority. Although a United Nations–backed plan envisioned Najibullah's resignation, exile, and the handover of authority to a neutral interim administration composed of technocrats, elders, and non-militarized figures, this framework lacked enforcement mechanisms. Armed factions that had fought the previous regime rejected political sidelining and moved quickly to secure territory and influence. The result was not regime change with continuity, but state collapse. Ministries, security forces, and administrative structures fragmented along factional lines, while Kabul itself became the central battleground for rival claimants. The erosion of institutional legitimacy was accompanied by widespread civilian suffering, producing a public perception that all armed actors were complicit in the destruction of the state, even when responsibility was unevenly distributed. From the perspective of key actors within Afghanistan, power during the post-1992 transition was defined less by constitutional authority than by control of armed forces, proximity to Kabul, and the ability to deny rivals exclusive access to the capital. At the time of the Najibullah government's collapse, both Ahmad Shah Massoud's and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's forces were positioned near Kabul,

creating immediate incentives for preemptive action. Massoud moved his forces into the capital and assumed a central military role, while parallel negotiations sought to translate battlefield positioning into a political settlement. As part of these efforts, arrangements were made in which Hekmatyar was designated prime minister, and Massoud temporarily relinquished or suspended his own executive authority in an attempt to halt the fighting and induce Hekmatyar's participation in a unified government.

This exchange, however, did not produce consolidation. Hekmatyar continued to resist outcomes that constrained his autonomous control over armed forces or subordinated his authority within a fragmented coalition, while other factions similarly retained independent military capacity. In the absence of an enforceable monopoly over coercive power, formal titles and temporary withdrawals failed to alter underlying incentives. Kabul remained the central arena of coercive bargaining rather than a functioning seat of governance. For civilian populations, the persistence of violence rendered distinctions between negotiated compromise and renewed confrontation largely irrelevant, reinforcing a generalized perception that the post-1992 political order lacked legitimacy regardless of individual concessions or intentions. The failure to consolidate authority in Kabul created a significant power vacuum, which was gradually filled by new actors who coalesced under the Taliban banner. Many of these individuals were drawn from previous mujahideen networks, ex-communist factions such as the Khalq and Parcham, radical Islamist groups, and even some former supporters of the monarchy under Zahir Shah. By organizing under a single disciplined movement, the Taliban were able to assert centralized control over territory that other factions had failed to hold, effectively monopolizing coercive authority in large parts of the country. From an international security perspective, collaboration—even intermittent—with organizations widely classified as extremist or terrorist can carry enduring consequences, as such participation may legitimize or strengthen these movements' coercive capacities. This consolidation under a new actor illustrates how, in the absence of an enforceable transitional authority and institutional continuity, diverse armed groups may unite under emergent powers capable of imposing order primarily through force rather than preexisting state structures.

A series of broader structural lessons emerges from Afghanistan's experience. First, revolutions or regime changes consolidate when a single center of authority survives or is rapidly constructed; fragmentation occurs when multiple armed actors claim victory. Second, institutional continuity matters as much as leadership change; the survival of administrative, security, and economic systems can prevent total collapse even amid ideological upheaval. Third, neutrality without enforcement is ineffective; attempts to sideline armed actors through technocratic or symbolic arrangements are unlikely to succeed when coercive power remains decentralized. Finally, moral restraint by individual leaders, while ethically significant, does not compensate for structural fragmentation and may, under certain conditions, accelerate state failure rather than prevent it. These lessons are particularly relevant when considering Iran through a comparative lens. Iran's post-1979 experience differed sharply from Afghanistan's trajectory. Despite revolutionary upheaval, Iran retained institutional continuity, including a functioning bureaucracy, security apparatus, and economic sovereignty. Authority consolidated rapidly around a single, uncontested leadership structure capable of suppressing rivals and imposing coherence. By contrast, Afghanistan in 1992 faced the collapse of its state apparatus, the absence of a unifying authority, and the proliferation of foreign-backed armed groups. Applying the Afghan model

mechanically to Iran would therefore be misleading; however, dismissing the comparison entirely risks overlooking the structural conditions under which sudden regime collapse can produce outcomes far worse than gradual or negotiated transformation.

Underlying this analysis is a recognition that legitimacy and force are inseparable during periods of transition. Popular dissatisfaction alone does not determine outcomes; rather, the configuration of armed actors, institutions, and elite coordination shapes whether a political system reforms, consolidates, or disintegrates. In Iran's case, current indicators suggest relatively high levels of institutional capacity, centralized coercive authority, and elite coordination compared to states that have experienced full collapse. These factors reduce the likelihood of immediate fragmentation. At the same time, sustained economic pressure, external intervention advocating regime change, or abrupt removal of central authority without a viable successor could erode these stabilizing mechanisms. In such scenarios, the Afghan experience underscores how quickly legitimacy can evaporate once institutions cease to function and armed actors begin competing openly. Comparative cases also illustrate the limits of externally engineered transitions. The Afghan UN plan of 1992 assumed that neutrality and international legitimacy could substitute for domestic coercive capacity. Its failure demonstrates that international consensus, absent enforcement and internal buy-in from armed actors, cannot prevent fragmentation. For Iran, proposals that envision sudden political transformation without clear mechanisms for maintaining institutional continuity and monopolizing force risk repeating similar dynamics, even if initial conditions differ substantially. While Iran's social cohesion, national identity, and state capacity are stronger than Afghanistan's were, these advantages are contingent rather than immutable.

Several broader lessons emerge for policymakers:

1. Regime change without institutional continuity carries a high risk of fragmentation and prolonged conflict.
2. A monopoly over coercive force is central to post-transition stability, regardless of ideological orientation.
3. Neutral or technocratic transition plans require enforcement mechanisms to be viable.
4. Moral restraint by individual leaders cannot substitute for structural consolidation.
5. Civilian legitimacy erodes rapidly when armed competition replaces governance.
6. External pressure advocating abrupt collapse may unintentionally empower the most militarized actors.
7. Gradual adaptation and negotiated reform, while imperfect, may reduce the risk of state failure in highly centralized systems.

In conclusion, the Afghan civil war of 1992–1996 shows the risks of sudden regime collapse without institutional continuity or centralized authority. While Iran differs, the lesson holds: transitions succeed when authority consolidates and institutions endure, and fail when the state fragments. Assessing Iran's stability requires considering not just political change, but the mechanisms that maintain continuity, legitimacy, and order.