The course of co-option: Co-option of local power-holders as a tool for obtaining control over the population in counterinsurgency campaigns in weblike societies. With case studies on Dutch experiences during the Aceh War (1873-c. 1912) and the Uruzgan campaign (2006-2010)
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Citation for published version (APA):
Kitzen, M. W. M. (2016). The course of co-option: Co-option of local power-holders as a tool for obtaining control over the population in counterinsurgency campaigns in weblike societies. With case studies on Dutch experiences during the Aceh War (1873-c. 1912) and the Uruzgan campaign (2006-2010)
Prologue
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Tirin Kot, 12 November 2008

‘It is pretty clear that these tribes have been cooperating with the Taliban, while thwarting the government ever since 2001’. Obaidullah, the head of Uruzgan’s Independent Election Commission (IEC) who is responsible for organizing next year’s elections, explains why he does not intend to open any polling stations in the areas of the Ghilzai sub-tribes to the north and east of the provincial capital Tirin Kot. With his carefully trimmed beard and an olive drab jacket matching the color of his eyes the header of Uruzgan’s incipient democracy looks more like a flashy businessman than a dweller of this backward rural province. Contrary to the tribal leaders who are welcome regulars at the Dutch camp, Obaidullah does not use the soft pillows on the ground, but prefers to sit on a chair at the table. Moreover, he not only behaves in a rather Western way, he also fully subscribes to the importance of introducing democracy in Afghanistan. Like nobody else Obaidullah knows that the elections are intended to raise popular consent for the government in Kabul. Almost continuously he stresses this point by waving a multi-colored English-language flyer of the overarching national IEC that emphasizes the importance of elections ‘according to the principles of independence, impartiality and professionalism’. Combined with his knowledge of Uruzgan’s local affairs this seemingly renders Obaidullah the perfect candidate to organize the 2009 elections and guarantee a free and fair vote. The intention not to establish any polling stations in the Ghilzai areas, however, does not fit this image, as this means that those people are effectively denied their right to vote. Some of these sub-tribes indeed keep ties with the Taliban, but this is not so much the consequence of sympathy for the insurgents as much as a ramification of years of violent repression and marginalization by former provincial governor and warlord-like local power-holder Jan Mohammed Khan. The upcoming elections provide an opportunity to realign and connect the Ghilzai sub-tribes with the government. Why would the head of Uruzgan’s IEC obstruct this?

When the Dutch diplomat, his interpreter, and I try to change Obaidullah’s mind the atmosphere turns grim quickly. Obaidullah defends his position by pointing at the lack of security in the Ghilzai areas. While there indeed is some Taliban-related activity in these areas and incidents occur regularly, the same is true for many other places in which polling stations are actually planned. Furthermore the situation in the Ghilzai areas has improved considerably over the last years since the Dutch Task Force Uruzgan (TFU) has started to draw these peoples into the camp of the government. Some local leaders have been cooperating to improve security and proved more than willing to approve development projects within their areas of influence. Even more important, the remaining insecurity can be directly linked

1 Martijn Kitzen, ‘Uruzgan Field Notes’ (Personal Record, Tirin Kot, 2008), 202-203.
to a lack of trust in the government. Augmenting opportunities for political participation by providing access to polling stations might function to repair this defunct connection between these people and the administration. In our opinion, therefore, Obaidullah’s argument of a lack of security lacks credibility. Moreover, Afghan soldiers and police officers, backed up by the TFU, will secure the elections in order to guarantee a safe balloting process in every part of the province. Despite our objections the now visibly annoyed Obaidullah sticks to his plan; there will be no polling stations in the Ghilzai areas. Although he promises to reconsider the planned locations of the polling stations one more time, the meeting now comes to an abrupt end. A quick handshake and a cold goodbye are all we are left with.

So, seemingly an important governmental official wants to deny the Ghilzai their opportunity to vote by citing security concerns. However, the depreciatory manner Obaidullah spoke about the Ghilzai as well as the fact that some other polling stations are planned in areas that suffer from similar security issues, betray that there is more to this matter than meets the eye. While his local origin leaves little doubt that the man responsible for Uruzgan’s elections is fully aware of the root causes of the troubles between the Ghilzai and the government -i.e. brutal repression under Jan Mohammed Khan’s rule-, his attitude reveals disdain and a lack of trust in these previously marginalized sub-tribes. What are the reasons for this bias? Jan Mohammed Khan still has an extensive network of associates in the province; is Obaidullah among them? Or is there another interest that urges him to aggrieve the Ghilzai? The longstanding conflict between his Barakzai sub-tribe and one of the Ghilzai sub-tribes, for example, could offer an explanation. All in all there are enough reasons we can think of. Despite his Western looks and behavior Obaidullah’s actions as a governmental official are in the first place determined by local interests. Consequently, the head of Uruzgan’s Independent Election Commission acts all but impartial and tries to exclude an important societal segment. In this way the government itself contributes to a continuation of the marginalization of the Ghilzai, and therefore pushes those tribesmen further into the arms of the Taliban instead of boosting popular consent for its own cause.

This incident provides yet another example of what Dutch soldiers have experienced here in Uruzgan for more than two years now; officially the Afghan government and her international allies are fighting the Taliban, but almost every day the TFU encounters that the reality on the ground is far more complicated than this rather linear depiction of the conflict suggests. The fog of war acts as a cloak under which warlords and tribal leaders fight for their personal interests, exploiting either the support of the Afghan government or the Taliban, depending on their needs at a specific moment. Old feuds are settled by mobilizing government troops or Taliban fighters against competitors. Although international forces strive to protect the population as thoroughly as possible, their alliance with the Afghan government has inherently rendered them an actor in this obscure dynamic of violent contention. Even before the start of the TFU mission Dutch soldiers and diplomats were struggling to get a grasp of the complexity of the local conflict in Uruzgan. This resulted in the sacking of Jan Mohammed Khan as provincial governor on 27 February 2006, just a
couple of days prior to the deployment of a Dutch quartermaster detachment that was to prepare the official start of the campaign on August 1. Although this move hints at an early awareness of the local circumstances in Uruzgan, it turned out a rather tough process to vet the local population and to obtain a precise understanding of the way in which old feuds and alliances are shaping current relationships between local power-holders that define the current political marketplace. Whereas it goes without doubt that the TFU has learned a lot since 2006 and that it is increasingly effective in maneuvering in this highly complicated societal landscape, it remains necessary to pay close attention to these matters; an unwelcome surprise or mistake is never far away. Nothing is as it seems in the murky arena in which the Afghan campaign is fought.

At the time of this particular incident I had already developed an awareness that the disposition of the Dutch soldiers among the local population in Uruzgan’s highly fragmented society dominated by local leaders resembled that of Dutch colonial troops during the Aceh War (1873-c. 1912). Yet, I was struck by the similarities in the societal dynamics of both conflicts when continuing my research back at home. In both cases local power-holders primarily seek to secure their personal aims and interact with Dutch troops or resistance fighters as serves their interest best. Moreover, I found that the work of Dr. Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje, the colonial government’s advisor for indigenous affairs, contained a valuable warning as he described the way warlord Teuku Uma succeeded in misleading the Dutch colonial administration through a ‘beautiful panorama that he magically projects on the eyes of the administration and which is founded on deception’.3 Indeed, when fighting an irregular opponent among the people in a highly fragmented society, nothing is as it seems.

3 ‘Snouck Hurgronje aan Van der Wijck’, undated, ed. E. Gobée and C. Adriaanse, Ambtelijk Adviezen van C. Snouck Hurgronje, 170. This letter can be dated to end 1895 as it is probably a draft version of a more formally formulated letter included in Nationaal Archief (NA), Ministerie van Koloniën (MvK) 6235, Geheim Verbaal 31 december 1895 M19, Indisch Depêche 9 november 1895 44/c.