

Tribal Leadership in Southeast Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this research paper is to look at certain underlying principles in the complex relationship of tribal leadership and the egalitarian structure of tribes. This paper will attempt to explain the presence of tribal leaders (Khans) in the segmentary and egalitarian structure of the tribal belt in Southeast, Afghanistan. In addition, it will examine the characteristics of egalitarian structure of *Pushtun* tribes and the rule of the Khan as a broker of the state or tribe.

The majority of the southeast *Pukhtun* tribes live within the geographic borders of Afghanistan, the exception being the *Wazir* and *Mehsud* tribes who also reside in Pakistan. The common characteristic of all Pukhtun tribes is the focus on paternal lineage for determining membership within the Pukhtun tribal segments. Another shared characteristic among Pukhtun tribes is the derivation of their segmentation, which is determined by their social composition. (Tapper, 1983)

Explaining the **political structure** of these tribes is difficult due to the multiplicity within tribal leadership. A number of leaders can influence the tribal decision-making process including: the tribal Masher (tribal leader), the Mullah, a Warlord or a *Mujaheedin* Commander, and sometimes a Khan. The influence each of these can wield depends on the particular situation. This paper will address the tribal political structure through a more detailed examination of Khan-ship. The paper will show that the authority of the Khan is quite limited and his power severely constrained; he is much more of a *leader* than a *ruler* and thus his tribesmen tend to be *followers* rather than *subjects*. (Anderson, 1983)

Pukhtun tribes tend toward a more acephalous structure, meaning a community without a direct chief or leader. This paper will discuss the Khan's unique position within this egalitarian tribal structure. As a result, the focus of this paper is the various aspects of traditional leadership within the egalitarian tribal structure of Southeastern Afghanistan.

KEYWORDS: Tribe, State, Khan, Politics, Egalitarian Structure, Southeast Afghanistan, Afghanistan,

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

Methodology for the research study:

This paper will account for the types of sources that are used in collecting the data and the research methods that have been applied in analyzing the collected data. The choice of sources and methods are mainly guided by the research questions and the aim of the study, while many sources were recommended by my research supervisor Prof. Dr. B.K Rakhimbekova.

The research is based on variety of sources of data: A - interviews with Khans, tribal elders, tribal members 2) interviews with intelligentsia B - internet websites- journal reports, recent analysis regarding traditional leadership amongst *Pukhtuns*. C - Reading literature regarding tribal leadership not only focusing on *Pukhtuns* but on any other tribal leadership around the world especially Middle East. I have supplemented the sources by reflecting with my personal observation of working in Southeast region, attending many local *Jirga* and meeting many of the tribal elites combining my experience of eight years with international aid agencies which supported local governance and community development.

INTERVIEWS:

Qualitative data is obtained primarily through interviews. It opened the opportunity to discuss, in depth with the various numbers of experts on the topic, visiting local and international NGO's offices and their work in relation to community development and local governance in Southeast Region. In order, however, to establish a framework around the interviews, and to focus on specific issues with different interviewees, the interviews were structured with questions prepared beforehand, but the interviewer/researcher was open to new issues and follow different, associated leads depending on the responses and willingness of the interviewee. For knowing the role of Khan in state and tribal development, I have conducted intensive, but structured and semi-structured interviews with the selected number of tribal elites and member in the region. A total of 27 people were interviewed since the beginning of Jan 2022 till April 2022.

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Document/Content analysis

Secondary source of data collection, in the form of research documents and other written material, were also applied to form part of the analysis. The secondary data came from a variety of documented sources;

- NGOs research documents like The Tribal Liaison Office (TLO) research papers.
- Recently written reports on the development of state and tribe communication in the region
- Reading local newspapers- News stories
- A vast list of books, journal reports and recent research papers on the topic which are listed in the bibliography of the paper.

These documents coupled with the interview data, assisted the researcher in providing a rich picture of Khan's rule in southeast tribal belt, Afghanistan.

Observation based on work experience in Southeast, Afghanistan:

Both primary and secondary data is supplemented with my observation during my work in Southeast, Afghanistan for community development and capacity building of local governance. This work experience helped me to reflect upon not only during the interviews but also document analysis. It helped me understand the structure and the role of traditional political elite in the development of tribe and state; especially, khans and tribal elders' interaction with local government and international organizations like NGOs, UN Offices and other aid agencies.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of the research study has been selected through discussion and guidance of Prof. Dr. B.K Rakhimbekova, in the wake of the studies of Khan's role and the impact of modernization through John Anderson 1973. The egalitarian structure of tribes and the presence of traditional leadership at the top has been the main argument of the paper. The theoretical debate, the tribe and state system are supported by arguments from several writers listed in the bibliography who analyzed Pushtun tribal structure through their field researches and studies.

Literature Review

Most of the work, already taken place on the issue, is mainly about the social and political structure of Pushtun tribes in general; specifically; on the topic of this research and the place where this research has taken place only John Anderson 1973 and Conrad Schetter 2007 have written papers. They argued that modernization has affected political leadership amongst tribes located in this region. By addressing modernization and its effect on tribal structure and its leadership they have come up with two difference conclusions. John Anderson claimed in 1970s that modernization has somehow taken Khan's position as a leader of the tribe out; while Conrad Schetter 's recent analysis and writing on Khans replies to John Anderson's paper and proving that there are still khans in Southeast who are busy in "feeding people" and "tying the knot of the tribes."

The above studies on the topic focus very specifically on the effect of modernization on Khan-ship. Two reasons make the present research study different and important. Firstly, there is no exhaustive literature available on the subject for the specific region which is focused in this paper if any; it is very general and superficial; secondly, it provides a detailed account on what the above discussion is aimed and concludes with the current role of the Khan in the development of state and tribe.

Egalitarianism and Tribe

Egalitarianism is both a social and political philosophy asserting the equality of all men, related to their access to the rights and advantages of their society¹. This philosophy is respected in the Pashtun Jirga System as well as other tribal. Various leaders such as Khans, *Qaumi Mashar (tribal leaders)*, Spingery (tribal elders), Mullah, Pir (Spiritual Leaders) and Qamanders are able to influence the decisions within a *Jirga*. These tribal political elites are able to mobilize the *Jirga* men to vote in favor of their own decisions by creating patronage networks and partnerships.

A tribe can be defined as a segmentary system based on agnatic relationships: a nested system of obligation based upon the degree of relationship through male ancestors. The more closely related people are, the stronger their obligation to cooperate, assist or avenge. (Anderson , 1973)

A segmentary society, such as a tribe, that is acephalous in structure tends to create equality on a grass roots level. The tribe is divided into segments, each having nesting attributes Ernest Gellner (1984) states, "a vital aspect of segmentary society is nesting. As there is no central authority, feuds among these groups and subgroups of tribes is "the most characteristic institution of such a society." In the absence of a state or legal system, the blood feud is the main institution for the enforcement of justice.

Egalitarian tribes, torn by feuds and rivalries, tend to have difficulties generating large-scale political leadership. Religion, such as Islam and *Pukhtunwali* Codes, provides an important means of conciliating feuding groups or constructing broader political coalitions for invasion or conquest. (Rubin, 2002)

¹ The definition of egalitarianism is retrieved from: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/egalitarianism>

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The *Pukhtun* society believes each man is equal to his fellow *Pukhtun*, thus individuals are assumed to be essentially independent actors as tribes of the type studied by Ibn Khaldun. (Rubin, 2002) The *Pukhtun* tribes are egalitarian and structured according to a segmentary lineage system. However, strong men compete for secular power, but the action power of an individual is short lived and undermined by the resistance of the peer institution of the *Jirga/shura*.

Khans are highly respected in such decision-making processes because of their family status and background. They are known for their honesty and leadership in both political and social situations. The Khan's history of providing facilities such as accommodations for the *Jirgamen and Dastarkhan or Malmaystia* (hospitality) towards the *Jirga* people is motivating factor that encourages the tribal members to address him as a Khan. As stated by Anderson (1983) "Khans are neither elected nor appointed, Khans are defined more by the nature of their following than by their own leadership."

The southeastern tribal belt displays a segmentary structure in which each main tribe is divided into sub branches and segments. This form of the segmentation is referred by tribesmen as a tree shape tribal structure. The sub segments are related through their patrilineal and patrilateral inheritance; thus, resembling the branches of a tree. To explore this point in more detail one can look at the following structures of the *Ismail Khail* branches: *Dail Pori, Haider Khail, Muta Khan, Bahram Khail, Burhan Khail and Dad Wal*.

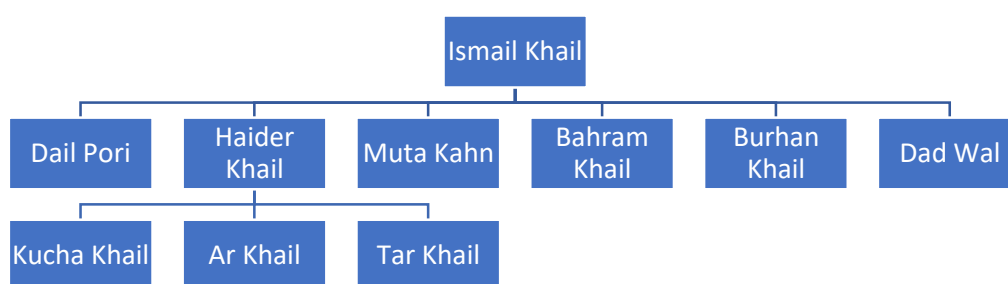


Figure 1: Tribal Structure *Source: Talebi (1993)

Khan's Position in egalitarian tribal structure:

The Southeastern tribes adhere to the segmentary lineage system as their political structure even if a Khan is not in a leadership position. As noted by Salzman (1983) that existence of a segmentary lineage system denotes that the tribal community does not recognize a top leadership position, and thus there is not a position for the Khan to fill. Which begs the question; can there be a Khan in a system that doesn't recognize a top leader? What this paper is suggesting in referring to Khan-ship as a leader of the tribe, is the Khan acting in a position of high political authority within the tribal group. There must be a hierarchy of authority, at the top of which, the Khan as a leader may reside.²

A Khan's title implies a claim of authority over others, it is a "statement of a person's willingness" to lead others; Khans within a segment compete for followers while the main sources of power are livelihood, distribution of wealth, large family size, and state support. (Brath, 1959)

Conversely, in noting the existence of a segmentary lineage system, we have identified a set of identical lineages allied relatively and continentally for political action in the form of decisions made by assemblies and councils (*Jirga*), but with no offices and no hierarchy of authority, and thus no top leader. (Salzman, 1983) Therefore, Khans and segmentary lineage systems would seem to be irreconcilable both logically and practically; a Khan-ship is hierarchically centralized and based upon stable relations amongst its component groups, whereas segmentary lineage system is egalitarian, decentralized and based upon variable and dependent relations among its constituents' groups. (Salzman, 1983)

The segmentary lineage within the tribal politics is represented within the role of the Khan and other tribal leaders during tribal councils (*Jirga*). During the *Jirga*, every tribal member expresses his opinion which is taken into consideration during the decision-making process at the end of the *Jirga*. Therefore, the role of the Khan is continually evaluated against tribal codes for solving disputes. Codes such as *Pukhtunwali*: They are called as *Narkh* (price) and are well known to many tribal elders. During the time a *Jirga* is conducted to resolve a dispute, the Khan has an equal opportunity to express an opinion toward the final decision. In some cases, the Khan has an advantage that may allow his opinion to consider more valuable than others. Because the Khan feeds the *Jirga*, he holds the *Dastarkhan* (table cloth), but also his position is personally financed then based on exploitation. (Anderson, 1973) He accommodates the members who come from distant parts of the village or from other villages, in his *Hujra* (Guesthouse). In addition, the *Mula* of the *Jirga*, who plays an important role in legitimizing the decisions of the *Jirga*, is fed by Khan. Therefore,

² Salzman (1983): explains and questions Chiefs in Baluchistan's political structure in the top, while here my questions are regarding Khans as in the top in Southeast tribal belt.

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because of all these mentioned cares which the Khan provides for the *Jirga* members, the Khan's role becomes a bit more dominant than other elders in the decision making process of the *Jirga*. (Anderson, J, 1978)

To simplify, the Khan achieves his position as a leader of the tribe by his virtue, ethical fitness, inheritance or he may be compelled by force. (Brath, 1959)

Finally, we can say that this dominant role of the Khan within the tribe undermines the segmentary lineage system of the tribe; which is considered egalitarian or decentralized without any social contract. On the other hand, the Khan does not reside inside of any formal bureaucracy that defines his position within a hierarchical political structure of politics in the tribe. He does not have any regular forces of implementation as the rule of law is perceived in hierarchical systems.

In Contrast, the *Jirga* (tribal council) has its own roles for implementing the discussion taken in the *Jirga*, for example: taking *Khalat or Machalgha* (deposit money), to ensure both sides of the quarrel obey the final decision of the tribal *Jirga*. Both the Khan and the *Jirga* can mobilize people in the event of conflict against an external force such as another tribe or a government. (Brath, 1959)

Overview of Southeast Tribal Belt:

Southeast Afghanistan (*Loya Paktia*) as it is extremely mountainous and thus not as populous, when compared to other areas of Afghanistan such as the Southern or Eastern regions. This region was once known for its population of nomads, but is now populated by almost one million settled dwellers living among the divided mountainous valleys and country side.

The region is still home to many *Kuchi* (nomads) who migrate from the far western regions during the summer season sometimes crossing the over the central region into *Hazarjaat*. This southeastern region is shared by both the *Ghalzai* and *Kalnari* tribes. The main *Ghalzia* tribes, which Ahmad's classifies as *Qalang* Tribes live in the plains and more agrarian areas. The *Qalang* type tribes include *Ahmadzai, Zurmati, Andar, Kharoti and Katawazi*. The *Kalnari* tribes, classified as *Nang* by Ahmad, are living in the mountains and valleys and include the *Mangal, Jadran or Zadran and Jaji*. (Ahmad, 1983)

Properties	Ghalzai (Qalang- tax) tribes	Kalnari (Nang- honor) tribes
Living Places	Living in plain or agrarian areas	Living in mountains and valleys, low production areas
GovernmentTaxation	Pays Tax to government	No tax is paid
Leadership	Malik or khans are famous	Accephalous, no one at the top
Structure	Follows state system	Egalitarian

Table 1: Ghalzai and Kalnari Tribes

Tribal structure is determined by district boundaries within provinces. The *Zadran* tribe resides in the mid region of the *Loya Paktia* which includes nine districts within three provinces; *Paktia, Pakitka and Khost*. This region is very mountainous and the tribe is linked by the valleys that lie between the tall mountains. The *Zadran* are the largest land holders and comprise the largest population of the *Loya Paktia* tribal structure. The next largest tribe is the *Mangal* who are living in four districts within the two provinces of *Paktia and Khost*. The *Mangal* also live in the mountains and their main source of income is firewood similar to the *Zadran*. An additional source of income is walnuts and *Zanghozai* (a dry fruit) which are sold in the bazaars of *Peshawar, Gardiz, and Kabul*. The third largest tribe is the *Kirlani Jajai* tribe who are live in four districts within the *Paktia and Khost* provinces. They also sell fire wood and have recently become known for their bamboo handicrafts. *Kharoti, Ahmadzai, Andar, Daigan, Mainzi, Dautani, Wazir, Chamkani and Bangash* are the other main tribes living in this region though they live on better agrarian land similar to the *Zurmat, Katwaz or Mutakhan*. (Ruttig, 2009) It has to be determined, that in addition to their previously noted businesses, these tribes also depend on remittances most often receiving remittance from younger members working in Gulf countries or Europe.

Conrad Schetter (2007) noted that these tribes share many similar values such as language and religious belief, Sunni Islam is perceived as the 'social glue' among the *Pushtuns*. Over the last three decades some dramatic changes have occurred in the region brought about by civil wars. Changes have included forced migrations, settlement in refugee camps and, labor migration to the Middle East. The most dramatic change that can be seen is the increased access to information brought on by modernity which drastically has affected the life of each *Pukhtoon* and the region as noticed by Conrad Schetter (2007).

Khan's position in Southeast Tribal Politics

Southeast region is known as a sole tribal belt, which is how the regional tribal politics strength has played an important role in shaping out the state politics in recent history. The loyalty of the tribes to its tribal political elites and codes has strengthen the role of the tribes in the region on sub national and then on national level.

The Southeastern tribal belt is now an ongoing maximal political entity a permanent focus of ultimate political loyalty a framework of ties and obligation which remains relevant whatever the political issue and the level of sub-groups involved in national politics of Afghanistan.

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This fact is both manifested in and affected by the state of Khan, which stands for the tribal politics as a whole with other elites within the tribe. The tribal level of political organization does not lie inactive until being brought into life by certain political events and structural configurations; on the contrary the tribe is an ongoing entity at all times and tribal membership is a relevant fact for all tribesmen at all time. Lower-level units maintain substantial political rights, duties and responsibilities. The most important of these are protection of life and property manifested in self-help and collective responsibility which is organized in terms of part lineages of structural equivalence which are activated contingently. Control of certain resources such as water resources like small ponds or running water through the valley in the form of streams also lies with minor lineage groups. Thus, within the ongoing tribal framework subunits of various levels are contingently activated and de-activated and reactivated in response to conflicts over life, energy and property. The individual tribesman finds himself not infrequently acting as a member of a lineage of greater or lesser depth (depending on the structural distance of the adversary) in regard to matters of the gravest importance, matters that are clearly political, of contingent by within the tribe must therefore be seen to be significant.

The coexistence of the non-contingent tribe with a series of contingent political sub groups can the tribal units, but also as a potential threat to the unity of the tribe and thus its existence as a tribal unit reinforced, by a division of spheres between the tribe and its subgroups. While the members and property through self-help to take revenge and demand composition according to the laws of blood feud, the tribe as a whole has the right and obligation to press for peace, to encourage settlement, and to compensate the injured. This formation of adversary groups according to the rules of structural equivalence and the contrary structuring of compensation after peacemaking, in which all minimal lineages of the tribe other than the offended one, no matter wither close to the offending or offended minimal lineages, contribute to the compensation of the latter. That is to say, in the settlement compensation, all minimal lineages act as members of the tribe as a whole in redressing the grievance of the offended lineage. Thus, in spite of the contingent sub-groups and the heavy political content of their rights and responsibilities, the tribe as a whole maintains its presence and influence, never disappearing, hovering always in the background, asserting its presence in ongoing and decisive ways.

In sum, the Southeast tribal belt as a unit, although far from monopolizing the political rights and responsibilities of tribal life, is able to maintain a continuing influential presence in the region. Tribal affiliation and tribal claims continue to be in the minds of the tribesmen, even when they are acting as members of sub-groups even when the claims of sub-groups take first priority. That this is the case is largely the result of the influence of the tribal political elite and in somehow the Khan, for the Khan is the living symbol of the tribe as a whole and is the active advocate of tribal claims, reminding, encouraging, threatening, pleasing, manipulating and agitating on behalf of the tribe in the name of the tribe as a whole. Make no mistake, the tribe as a political unit is greatly weakened by the contingent carry rights and responsibilities which are thus outside the control of the tribe, and because the subgroups therefore present a continual threat to the unity of the tribe. Limited in power, competing for loyalty with its constituent sub-groups, threatened by schism and disunity, the tribes as a political unit none the less exists continually and continually influences the course of events.

Tribal Centralization in Southeast Afghanistan

Tribes are in general highly decentralized in southeast of Afghanistan. As indicated above many of the core decisions are made through *Jirga* system which represents the lineage system and it makes the larger portion of the political decision-making role. *Pukhtunwali* codes which have been known for years are applied to disputes in the tribes, recently they are compromising on some of the laws which are in contradiction to the Islamic laws like giving a virgin in *Badal* (Revenge), these changes are considered so minor and few which have been made due to the exposure of the tribes to the various regimes on central level of the country. Taliban's era of the government has introduced strictly the obedience of Islamic laws especially in *Badal*.

On the other hand, the peace keeping or conflict mediation within the tribe or with other tribes is followed as a *Pukhtunwali* codes which exists for history in the region which rely on the will of the parties in evolved how to follow them, and how strictly to apply these roles in the follow up of feuds on lands or other conflicts within the tribe or with other tribes as a one entity. Access to pasture and natural water source within the tribal territory is a birthright and not subject to any central allocation or control as observed by Salzman (1983) in *Baluchi* nomads. Livestock and cultivation are owned, controlled, and disposed of by individuals and small families. Dwellings and household equipment are owned and controlled by individuals and their families. Weapon are acquired and owned by individuals. As a prove verb is famous in *Pushtuns* for carrying and owning weapons in the region which says "*Wasla ka bar dah hah, hum Pa kar dah*" (If weapons are burdens, still they are required to be owned).

Movement out of and back to the tribal territory is a matter of individual judgment till the movement is not directed towards the conflicting parties to whom the tribe in general is having a dispute, it is considered a personal or individual decision. Religious observance is guided by Mullahs living among and supported by the tribesmen. They are Sunni, Muslim. The Khan does not have any control on the tribesmen of way of living nor he coordinates or guides any way of living but he somehow looks after his farmers who are used to work for him in his fields.

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Centralization can be seen in reflecting external affairs of the tribe where tribes which are led by a khan, he is the only supposed person who represents the tribe for example in any decision making with the state, or any other entities which are led by a stronger *Shura* or *Jirga* composition, the rule of representing the tribe is central to the *Shura* members.

More important are other groups such as neighboring tribes and representatives of the government. Here the Khan represents the tribe and acts on its behalf. Negotiations with outsiders over such weighty matters as war and peace, control of disputed resources, and political alliance and affiliation, are conducted through the Khan and his *Mallgarys* (companions), (Anderson, 1973) for the Khan represents the tribesmen, he does not and cannot dictate to them; he leads rather than rule them; if Khan as a leader whose followers refuse to follow is no longer a Khan or a leader, and so, even in this area which is especially the realm of the conflict and changes, he must be highly sensitive to public option, to the preferences of and constraints upon his tribesmen.

Authority of a Khan

The authority of the tribal Khan is severely limited. As the leader of independent tribe, the Khan stands for and represents the tribe, but is largely the servant of the tribe. (Anderson, 1983) Most areas of tribal life are in the hands of lower-level groups or individuals, as discussed above, which leaves little of policy or administration in the hands of the Khan. Decisions are related to the level of organization on discussion, consultation, debate, assessment and reassessment and compromise on each dispute and matter.

One would not be far wrong to characterize the internal role of the Khan as that of animator, giving life to, motivating the tribe as a political unit through providing an example for, encouraging, inspiring, and threatening his tribesmen as the chief of *Baluch* discussed by Salzman (1983). But as with any representative, the Khan ultimately depends on the decisions and actions of his tribesmen, those who voluntarily stand behind him. Therefore, to balance the power; khan relies on his *Malgarys* to support him in making a decision in a *Jirga* or to oppose other political elites in a discussion or decision-making processes within the tribe.

Conclusion:

Khan does not have any specific means of enforcement to apply his decisions made in the tribe; generally speaking, the Khan is unable to enforce policies and his decisions. There is no police army available to the Khan, no mechanism for bringing physical coercion to bear upon the tribesmen. Not that he has any such authority. In any case, the means of coercion are distributed through the tribe, and the organization of coercion is a decentralized tribe wide system, the segmentary lineage system. The Khan as every other tribesman is in the lineage system; coercive action by the Khan segmentation would simply activate the structurally equivalent opposing lineage. Physical force is not a means available to the Khan for governance of the tribe.

Nor is the Khan able to sanction by offering or withholding material resources. Little of the collective tribal resources are under his control. Currently, Khan has very little to offer to create a patronage network to challenge any opposing elites within the tribe. Now days, the Khan is not an economic patron; he is not a sole supporter of his tribal followers and thus is not in a position to use economic resources for sanctioning power.

However, the Khan does perform services for the tribesmen, and these are valuable and valued. Perhaps the most common service is acting as an intermediary between individual tribesmen, between groups of tribesmen, between the tribe and other tribes, and between the tribe and government authorities. These services can be offered or withheld, and by such means tribesmen can be sanctioned, positively or negatively, at the discretion of the Khan. Whereas, this position of khan can be easily challenged by any other tribal elite mentioned above; In fact, khan can benefit from the influence of his *Malgary* to put pressure somehow on his tribesmen to obey his decision. In short, the Khan cannot impose his will upon tribesmen by means of force or any other coercive means available for local governors.

To sum up, currently, the Khan-ship is a weak political office. The Khan leads a small tribe, the unity of which is to a degree undercut by politically strong subgroups of similarly strong positions holding to oppose khan as a sole political leader of the tribe. There are very few tools which Khan can benefit to impose his decision on the tribesmen like using patronage network or *Malgary* for such purposes.

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