

Afghanistan's Uncertain Transition from Turmoil to Normalcy

Barnett R. Rubin. New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2006. \$10.00. 56 pp.

In 2001, a combination of US Special Operations and CIA forces, airpower and Afghan indigenous forces overthrew the Taliban regime in less than three months. Some individuals involved in the operation argued that it revitalised the American way of war. Afghanistan established the groundwork for a democratic political system, which included presidential elections in 2004 and parliamentary elections in 2005. Afghan women enjoyed far greater freedom than during the Taliban period, and millions of children, including girls, returned to school. However, this initial success transitioned into a prolonged counter-insurgency campaign as the Taliban, forces loyal to Jalaluddin Haqqani and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, foreign fighters, local tribes, and criminal organisations began a sustained effort to overthrow the Afghan government.

In *Afghanistan's Uncertain Transition from Turmoil to Normalcy*, Barnett Rubin argues that 'Afghanistan has the potential to be a disastrous situation if intelligent, measured steps are not taken'. On the security front, he argues that several steps are critical. One is for the United States, which has more leverage in Islamabad than its European partners, to encourage the Pakistan government to isolate and end the Taliban-led insurgency. This should be part of a broader strategy that includes minimising provocative activity by India in Afghanistan, settling the Afghan-Pakistani border dispute and establishing regional consensus on Afghanistan. On the governance front, Rubin argues that Afghanistan needs to make judicial reform a priority since 'the lack of judicial reform has become a bottleneck for security, governance, and economic development'. This includes dealing with corruption in such places as the Supreme Court. The US and Afghan governments should also support greater fiscal reform, including improving border controls (for revenue collection) and state banks (for expenditures).

On the economic and social development front, he argues that the main counter-narcotics goal should be to reduce the absolute and relative size of the opium economy while maintaining positive growth that favours the poor in the overall economy. This should involve an alternative livelihoods policy that includes comprehensive rural development in such areas as electric power, water, roads and debt relief. He also argues that international donors should focus more on building indigenous financial capacity. More than 75% of all aid to Afghanistan goes to projects directly implemented or contracted by international organisations. This mode of delivery, Rubin notes, is self defeating. The best mechanisms for such direct budgetary support might be with the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund managed by the World Bank and the two funds managed by United Nations Development Programme: the Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan and the Counternarcotics Trust Fund.

The problems in Afghanistan are indeed grave. Afghan insurgent groups have used support from the international jihadi network, wealthy Arabs and some in Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence to build a power base in Pashtun tribal areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. These groups have constructed increasingly sophisticated improvised explosive devices, including some with remote-control detonators. They have also conducted a campaign of suicide attacks. There were more suicide attacks in Afghanistan in 2006 than in the rest of Afghanistan's recorded history combined. The cultivation and production of opium in 2006 was the highest ever.

Rubin is perhaps the most authoritative scholar on Afghanistan in the United States. This short policy paper offers a litany of useful recommendations. He succinctly covers the most significant causes of instability in Afghanistan today, including the role of neighbours (especially Pakistan), corruption and faulty international aid practices. He also includes several intriguing suggestions, such as bringing the mosque-based traditional village administration and dispute settlement procedures under state control. Since the sermon, or khutba, is a major means through

which the ulema communicate their views to the Afghan people, his logic is that the Afghan state should harness this power. The fact that several of Rubin's recommendations have already been implemented is a testament to his work. For example, Afghanistan's parliament pushed for the removal of the chief justice, Fazel Hadi Shinwari, a fundamentalist firebrand whom Afghan President Hamid Karzai had appointed in deference to Islamist demands. In his place, Karzai appointed Abdul Salam Azimi, a moderate Islamic scholar and the primary drafter of Afghanistan's democratic constitution. In addition, Rubin's argument for a greater NATO military presence and more financial resources has been repeated by Western officials such as US General John Craddock, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander.

However, one of the book's most significant strengths – its focus on policy – is also one of its chief weaknesses. There are several issues Rubin mentions that are worthy of serious analysis, yet which remain unexplored. For example, he argues that security in Afghanistan hinges on democratising Pakistan. This is a debatable point. American academics such as Jack Snyder have convincingly argued that states in transition from authoritarianism to democracy are likely to be unstable and war prone. This suggests that a democratisation process in Pakistan, assuming it was successful, could trigger greater instability – not less. In addition, Rubin argues that Afghan policymakers need to make transitional justice a priority. But research on war crime trials, truth commissions and other types of transitional justice suggest that they can trigger nationalist or ethnic backlashes and revive – rather than ameliorate – tensions. Whether it is wise to support transitional justice in the midst of an active insurgency is debatable. The pros and cons of this recommendation, as with several others, could be more adequately explored.

Some have argued that Afghanistan is nearing a 'tipping point', in which it becomes embroiled in a steadily widening civil war. This would be unfortunate. If followed, Barnett Rubin's panoply of recommendations in such areas as security, governance, rule of law, economics and social development would go a long way toward preventing this Hobbesian outcome.

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