



Games without Rules: The Often-Interrupted History of Afghanistan

By Tamim Ansary

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Today, most Westerners still see the war in Afghanistan as a contest between democracy and Islamist fanaticism. That war is real; but it sits atop an older struggle, between Kabul and the countryside, between order and chaos, between a modernist impulse to join the world and the pull of an older Afghanistan: a tribal universe of village republics permeated by Islam.

Now, Tamim Ansary draws on his Afghan background, Muslim roots, and Western and Afghan sources to explain history from the inside out, and to illuminate the long, internal struggle that the outside world has never fully understood. It is the story of a nation struggling to take form, a nation undermined by its own demons while, every 40 to 60 years, a great power crashes in and disrupts whatever progress has been made. Told in conversational, storytelling style, and focusing on key events and personalities, *Games without Rules* provides revelatory insight into a country at the center of political debate.

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Editorial Review

From [Booklist](#)

Afghan American writer Ansary (West of Kabul, East of New York, 2002) tells the history of modern Afghanistan with a master storyteller's confidence and a disarmingly casual tone. "Wow!" he remarks, reacting to Afghan president Sardar Daoud's willingness to implement a new constitution that would limit his own power. "When has something like this ever happened?" But don't be fooled: this is a nuanced, sophisticated historical narrative that strives to tell Afghan history from an Afghan perspective, as "the story of a zigzag journey toward some end point despite regular interruptions by foreign interventions," including the strategic military adventures of Great Britain, the Soviet Union, and the U.S. It's an open question, of course, what that end point may be; Afghanistan is still a country in conflict, and the present is a moving target. Yet, as Ansary points out, "There was always a here here," and though the great powers have changed through history, "The land-in-between never disappeared." Throughout this selection, the author's love for his native land and his optimism for its future shine through. --Brendan Driscoll

Review

Rajiv Chandrasekaran, author of *Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan*

"In *Games Without Rules*, Tamim Ansary has written the most engaging, accessible and insightful history of Afghanistan. With gifted prose and revealing details, Ansary gives us the oft-neglected Afghan perspective of the wars, foreign meddling and palace intrigue that has defined the past few centuries between the Indus and Oxus. This brilliant book should be required reading for anyone involved in the current war there -- and anyone who wants to understand why Afghanistan will not be at peace anytime soon."

Kirkus

"A breezy, accessible overview of centuries of messy Afghan history, including the present military quagmire.... As a native of Kabul, Ansary lends precious insight into the makeup of the typical Afghan village, with its tidy, self-sufficient, patriarchal hierarchy and need to keep the nomads at bay... Lively instruction on how Afghanistan has coped, and continues to cope, with being a strategic flash point."

Christian Science Monitor

"*Games without Rules*" explains longstanding problems and internal difficulties encountered in efforts toward nation-building in Afghanistan and shows how great power politics (and invasion) have been stalling the process for the past two centuries."

San Jose Mercury News

"Despite extensive reporting on the war in Afghanistan, San Francisco journalist and author Ansary thinks there's still a great deal of misunderstanding about the reasons for the conflict. In this history, he focuses on key developments that shaped current events."

Booklist

"Ansary tells the history of modern Afghanistan with a master storyteller's confidence...this is a nuanced, sophisticated historical narrative that strives to tell Afghan history from an Afghan perspective...The author's love for his native land and his optimism for its future shine through."

Publishers Weekly, STARRED review

“Ansary, an Afghan-born US citizen... offers an illuminating history of the country, providing not only a chronology but a deep cultural analysis that allows outsiders a comprehensive picture of Afghan mores and practices. This insider's perspective fills large gaps in contemporary outsiders' understandings of why these powers have failed and hopefully points the way towards forms of international cooperation that will work for Afghanistan rather than against it. Ansary has a gift for using informal language to illustrate his points in a way that doesn't compromise the legitimacy of his narrative. His ability to contextualize the history and situate it in culture, as well as to remind readers of when to keep track of important figures (sometimes for decades) is refreshing. Ansary has produced an invaluable resource to those curious about this tumultuous region.”

Geographical Magazine

“As an Afghan-American, Tamim Ansary is well placed to present the Western reader with a penetrating view of his complex and often baffling native land. With the 2014 draw-down of NATO combat forces from Afghanistan approaching a better-late-than-never understanding of how the country works and its history is crucial if we're to avoid the mistakes of the past.”

New Statesman

“(Ansary's) is an authentically Afghan voice, offering not an authoritative account of the ebb and flow of foreign entanglement in Afghanistan but a personal account of how an intelligent Afghan observer sees the course of events from the outside.”

Irish Times

“Ansary has that rare gift of being able to blend an academic's knowledge with the skill of a natural storyteller. He is Afghanistan-born, and although he left when he was just 16, in 1964, he has clearly spent a lifetime collecting stories, which he has edited masterfully, knowing exactly when to move away from the major events and focus on the tiny details that give you a sense of what life must have been like for the country's many poor villagers, who often had no idea what was happening in their capital city. Refreshingly he keeps his focus on Afghans, with the foreigners appearing for brief periods, usually offering little and understanding less. I was gripped as I read the first 200 pages of *GAMES WITHOUT RULES*... The author brilliantly describes the personalities of these men and the conflict, conceit or foreign intervention that brought them to power.”

About the Author

Tamim Ansary is the author of *Destiny Disrupted: A History of the World through Islamic Eyes* and *West of Kabul, East of New York*, among other books. For ten years he wrote a monthly column for Encarta.com, and has published essays and commentary in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Salon*, *Alternet*, *TomPaine.com*, *Edutopia*, *Parade*, *Los Angeles Times*, and elsewhere. Born in Afghanistan in 1948, he moved to the U.S. in 1964. He lives in San Francisco, where he is director of the San Francisco Writers Workshop.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Derek Morton:

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