



Games without Rules: The Often-Interrupted History of Afghanistan

By *Tamim Ansary*

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Games without Rules: The Often-Interrupted History of Afghanistan By Tamim Ansary

The history of modern Afghanistan is an epic drama, a thriller, a tragedy, a surreal farce. Every forty years or so, over the last two centuries, some great global power has attempted to take control of Afghanistan, only to slink away wounded and bewildered. Games without Rules recounts this strange story, not from the outside looking in, as is usually the case, but from the inside looking out. Here, the interventions and invasions by foreign powers are not the main event. They are interruptions of the main event, for Afghans have a story of their own, quite apart from all the invasions (a story often interrupted by invasions!) Drawing on his Afghan background, Muslim roots, and Western and Afghan sources, Tamim Ansary weaves an epic story that moves from a universe of village republics the old Afghanistan through a tumultuous drama of tribes, factions, and forces, to the current struggle. The drama involves a dazzling array of colorful characters such as the towering warrior-poet Ahmad Shah, who founded the country; the wily spider-king Dost Mohammed the Great, who told the British I am like a wooden spoon; you can toss me about, but I will not be broken; and the late nineteenth-century Iron Amir, who said a telescope would interest him only if it could shoot bullets, since what use had he for the moon? A compelling narrative told in an accessible, conversational style, Games without Rules offers revelatory insight into a country long at the center of international debate, but never fully understood by the outside world.

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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.""

"Middle East Journal"

"Ansary ... sheds light on over two centuries of Afghan history, giving an account of the historical struggles undertaken by a fractious people across a landscape of rugged steppes and unforgiving deserts.... [He] argues that the fatal error of ... unsuccessful modern invaders lies in their inability to recognize the internal struggles of those withd

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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 Afghan-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.

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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.

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