

Revolution Unending, Afghanistan: 1979 to the present, by Gilles Dorronsoro. Translated from French by John King. New York, NY: Columbia University Press in association with the Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Nationales, Paris, 2005. xxiii + 356 pages. Maps. Chron. Gloss. Sel. bibl to p. 362, index to p. 370. \$29.50 cloth.

Revolution Unending is an excellent and very thorough study of the formation and evolution of social, organizational, economic and religious segments of Afghan society since 1979. It is grounded in Gilles Dorronsoro's extensive field research in many regions of Afghanistan and provides particularly balanced and objective discussions of topics, such as Taliban policies, that are rarely tackled objectively elsewhere. Its main weakness is an underspecified theoretical perspective.

The introduction briefly discusses a number of perspectives on Afghan conflicts (systemic, ethnic, tribal and even organizational), poses some broad questions about social and political orders, and provides the author's hypotheses without much attention to alternative ones. This, however, is not a book about rigorous and sustained hypothesis-testing, even if we find scattered instances in the text where the author engages in such an exercise. This is regrettable because the socio-economic thread that unifies the narrative, if articulated more trenchantly, would have been a worthy competitor for Barnett Rubin's excellent political economy explanation of the same events and of an organizational perspective I am developing in a forthcoming book.(1)

The introduction also contains the only reference to the "Revolution" in the title, a puzzling choice of words because the author frequently notes in the text that victors in different Afghan conflicts rarely managed to overhaul the social order according to their wishes. True, advocates of new social orders abound in Afghan history, but the state was most often weak and new elites frequently failed to transform society beyond the larger towns. Perhaps Dorronsoro is referring to an ultimate, inevitable revolution that emulates the classic examples, but it is safer to speak of mere conflict until one takes place in Afghanistan.

The first two chapters of the book (Part One) provide the necessary historical, sociological and political background to the post-1979 conflicts.

The chapters of Parts Two and Three are the most valuable chapters of the book. They provide a highly detailed discussion of the dynamics and organization of conflict in Afghanistan between the Soviet invasion and the rise of the Taliban. The author's field research gives him a strong comparative advantage for narrating, analyzing and interpreting developments. Most writers on post-1979 Afghan conflicts have witnessed events in a limited geographic area at best and supplement their knowledge with evidence gathered by others who visited other regions. Dorronsoro, however, seems to have visited more provinces of Afghanistan than most. Those empirical chapters are necessary reading for all those interested in studying the Soviet occupation and the civil war that followed.

This volume is a translated and expanded version of a French edition published in 2000. The added chapters (Parts Four and Five) deal, as would be expected, with the later part of the Taliban episode and the events that unfolded with the US invasion of Afghanistan. The new chapters are not as empirically-grounded as the earlier ones because Dorronsoro, like most

scholars, did not have access to Afghanistan during those tumultuous years. They do, however, provide some of the better and most detached discussions of the Taliban's policies and their relations with others, including the United States.

As a long-time observer of Afghan affairs, Dorronsoro (Part Four) does not succumb to the currently dominant tendency to demonize the Taliban but analyzes the Taliban phenomenon in the context of what preceded it—the utter chaos and predatory environment of the civil war. He does not fail to describe the suffocating and absurd Taliban restrictions on women, but also reminds us that they went along with similarly problematic limitations on Afghan men and children, that they were not too different from the restrictions other Afghan Islamists supported by the US have imposed, and that they were in effect mostly enforced in Kabul. His reasoned discussion, with a tone that is neither condemnatory nor apologetic, is of great import for those who want to understand what the current return to chaos, crime and fragmentation bodes for the future.

Dorronsoro (Part Five) is not optimistic about the prospects of the current US venture in Afghanistan. He finds serious limitations in the contradiction between state building and the emergence of autonomous local leaders, conflict among state elites, the failure to mobilize international financial support, problems with rebuilding the Afghan military, the rise of ethnic hostility, the negative image of US troops and a stubborn insurgency. Recent developments seem to support such pessimism.

In sum, this first-rate empirically-grounded book is a must read for those trying to understand the social dimensions of post-1979 Afghan conflicts.

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1. Rubin, Barnett. *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.