

February 2002

Inside This Issue

[Brother of UMUC Faculty Member to Receive Medal of Honor](#)

[A Few Words from Frank Kent About the UMUC Alumni Association](#)

[Focus on Faculty: Cunningham's Art Celebrates His Inspiration](#)

[Everybody Can Serve: Honor Martin Luther King Jr. Year Round](#)

[Perspective: Social and Political Changes in Afghanistan and Pakistan](#)

[UMUC Offers Signal Officers Opportunity for Advanced Degrees](#)

[Professor Crafts Course on Polar Exploration](#)

[CVU Unveils Multimedia Introduction to Better Opportunities Program](#)

[News Updates and Briefs](#)

[Appointments, Relocations](#)

[Quick News About](#)



John S. Habib

Perspective

Social and Political Changes in Afghanistan and Pakistan

By John S. Habib

It is titillating to think that a dividend of the War on Terrorism might be substantive political and social change in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The idea, of course, is that political change would be progressive; that it would introduce Western-style representative government, due process, stability, and accountability. Social change would emancipate women, protect laborers, and raise the masses from abject poverty. Those who argue that political and social change are imminent may wish to assuage the consciences of others who are

[Kudos: News About Your Colleagues](#)

[Letters to the Editor](#)

[On Your Radar Screen](#)

[UMUC's Online Publications](#)

appalled that Afghans are caught, once again, in the crossfire of successive, internationally sponsored wars not of their own making.

I don't expect political or social change any time soon. The Afghani and Pakistani masses probably do not either. There are a number of reasons.

Social and political change is effected through internal reforms, through violent or non-violent resistance, or through unilateral or collective international force.

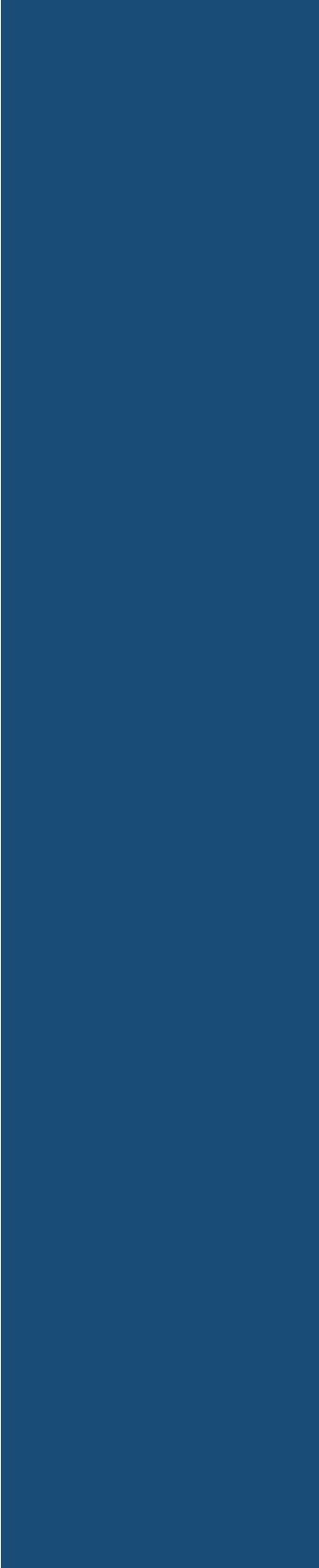


PERSPECTIVE

In Afghanistan and Pakistan today, the internal and external fundamentals that obstruct reform are created and perpetuated, in the main, by powerful nations that support any regime as long as it does not threaten their interests. Powerful nations ignored the internal crimes of the Ba'ath Regime in Iraq and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan until they perpetrated unspeakable external crimes, to mention two obvious examples.

President Bill Clinton refused even to shake hands with Pakistani leader General Musharif at an international function, but President George W. Bush enlisted him as a partner in the War Against Terrorism, lifted sanctions, and showered him with billions of dollars, despite the fact that Musharif had not restored democracy to Pakistan nor renounced its policy of pursuing nuclear military power. Far from indicting Bush for duplicity, this turnabout only exposes the principle that self-interest drives international politics. Social and political reform in poor or weak countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan are subordinate to those of the great powers.

But beyond that, the fact is that much of Afghanistan's troubled modern history has been caused by efforts to reform the system. Any group that introduced reforms was confronted with an onslaught of opposition, because the proposed reforms inevitably disrupted the distribution of tribal, ethnic, religious, social, political, or economic power. At best there was compromise between what was desirable and what was doable; at worst, there were coups and military confrontations. The reforms of

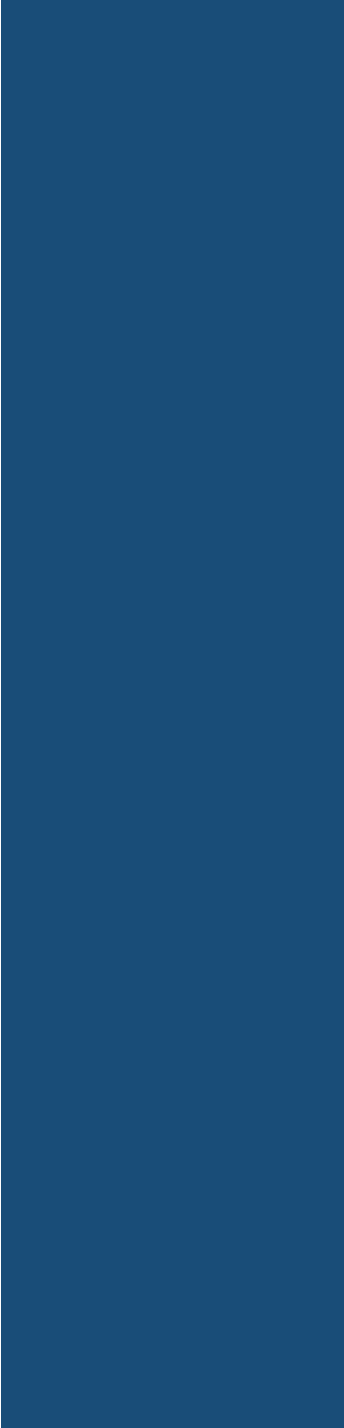


Amanullah in the late 1920s, the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in the mid-1960s, and the Taliban in the mid-1980s all met violent opposition. Any new government that attempts reform in Afghanistan will face similar challenges.

But it is difficult to even to speak of reform in a country like Afghanistan. Not long ago, Ahmad Fawzi, the United Nation's coordinator for aid to Afghanistan, characterized the social conditions there as primitive, with entire families living in caves. Basic survival is the national preoccupation, and what is left of the bureaucracy has not been paid in years. The situation in Pakistan is slightly better, but their disenchantment with the political and social power structure is just as deep. Pakistan is by definition an Islamic country whose source of law is the Qur'an. Despite progress made in that country, there remains a dichotomy between large segments of society. Democracy will not improve the situation, if the example of Algeria is a measure. When it appeared that the Islamic Salvation front was on the verge of winning the elections in Algeria, a military coup d'etat rose to power and canceled the elections, with the tacit approval of the West. How might the West respond if free elections in Pakistan or Afghanistan threatened to install governments likely to introduce "regressive reforms"?

The Afghans have had plenty of change in the past 25 years. A repressive communist regime overthrew a medieval regime and introduced radical political and social reforms. Much of the population rejected these reforms and took up arms. The communist regime was defeated by an American-supported anticommunist coalition that introduced repression. That coalition was replaced by the Taliban—supported by the Pakistanis, Saudis, and Americans—that introduced its own reforms and imposed them by force. Now the American-Pakistani coalition has destroyed the Taliban and replaced it with another coalition.

Is it any wonder that the Afghani people, traumatized by 25 years of war with no end in sight, trust no indigenous government or any foreign power and are fearful of reform?



I suspect that the Afghani people would settle for any regime that provided the basic necessities of life and reintegrated the nation into the international community. It would appear that the restructuring of the country must be the priority, not substantive political and social change, if for no other reason than that the powers that used Afghanistan as a battlefield for their own ends haven't the resources, interest, stamina, or, for that matter, the influence to undo the knotted fabric of Pakistani, let alone Afghani, society.

Cosmetic reform will emerge. The coalition powers will see to that. In Afghanistan, women will have the option to veil or not and they will serve in the government once again. But how will these reforms improve the quality of the lives of the masses of women, some of whom may prefer to retain the veil? There will be pro forma nods to due process and representative government, but how will this affect the mass of the population that have been denied a quarter of a century of basic education? In all cases, the answer is, "Not much."

In the foreseeable future, the social and political system based on the tribe, on ethnic unity, on religious conformity, will remain the governing principle of Afghani and Pakistani life. And well that it should. It is not likely that the masses want to change a system that provides for each group a safe haven. The groups that will not abandon them are those that have vested interests in their survival.

John S. Habib received his PhD from the University of Michigan. He is a Fulbright Scholar, Fulbright-Hays Fellow, three-time National Defense Foreign Language Fellow, and retired U.S. diplomat assigned to embassies in the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe. He is the author of the book Ibn Sa'uds Warriors of Islam. He has taught with UMUC since 1989 and currently resides in Brussels and Paris.