

Afghan Rumour Bazaar, by Nushin Arbabzadah, published by Hurst 9781849042314 reviewed by Madeleine Moon MP

As a member of the UK Parliament's Defence Select Committee and a delegate to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly I have read reports, taken evidence from a variety of sources and visited Afghanistan several times. Nushin Arbabzadah's highly readable Afghan Rumour Bazaar reveals a new Afghanistan, one that the world needs to understand if we are to have a positive future engagement with the country in which we have invested so much blood and treasure.

As we enter 2014 the world awaits the transition to a new chapter in the story of Afghanistan; as ISAF forces depart and a new President is elected. Evidence indicates the Taliban will renew its onslaught on the fragile Afghan state, the National Security Forces and the exhausted war weary civilian population. The promise that the foreigners would not desert the country is in tatters. The advance warning of the departure date, a gift to the Taliban, has left the ISAF forces facing failure and Afghans' a possible descent into civil war.

Ms Arbabzadah details how she fled Afghanistan with her parents in 1988 settling in Germany for 20 years before returning "angry and vocal: educated and self confident" to a society she describes as "in the midst of a full blown identity crisis". There are, she claims, three types of people in Afghanistan, "Al-Qaida (the insurgents); Al-Faida (the enriched) and Al-Gayeda (the fucked)." Clearly she feels the majority of Afghans fall into the latter category and none more so than those who took part in the deeply flawed 2009 Presidential election. With large swathes of the population facing rocket and suicide attack threats from the Taliban for taking part in the election their bravery in voting was rewarded by ballot rigging. With little to trust in the new state Ms Arbabzadah describes the country as dividing on ethnic lines resulting in shadow fiefdoms under warlord command rather than having a national identity and a centrally run state. The picture painted does not bode well for the 2014 elections.

Reading some of the chapters felt like reviewing papers and presentations from military officers and think tanks over the past five years. The Afghan government and the West's failure to deal with corruption to ensure the billions poured into Afghanistan impacted on ordinary people's lives rather than enriching the political classes, war lords and the Taliban are discussed at great length with little outcome. In a section on corruption Ms Arbabzadah comments that no one in Afghanistan understands the meaning of the word. The bribery required of petty officials to augment meagre salaries through to personal enrichment from business deals, she sees as being part of the Afghan way of life. The west she feels fails to acknowledge its own corruption in the awarding of overpriced contracts to global corporations with limited capability. The description of corruption creating a parasitic economic system in which everyone and none is corrupt is telling but offers no answers to the way forward through the financial morass into which Afghanistan is falling. With western economies facing financial, hardship public opinion will not tolerate the ongoing funding of an Afghan state that enriches a corrupt elite and does little to build a viable state for the betterment of its citizens.

Failing to provide legitimate elections and tackle corruption sit next to the failure to tackle the scourge of poppy production as meriting a great deal of the discussion in the rumour bazaar where it is widely believed that the west is involved in drug smuggling. During a recent Defence Select committee evidence session looking at the Taliban attack on Camp Bastion in 2012 it was acknowledged that poppy fields had been allowed to grow right up to the fence of the western base taking advantage of waste water run off. Under the cover of these poppy fields Taliban fighters were able to cut an opening into the security fence and enter the base. It is easy to see why western rhetoric about the evils of opium and the casual attitude towards its growth, even alongside an ISAF base, raises

questions about western consistency and motivation. Ms Arbabzadah sums the problem up stating; "With no clear and coherent drugs policy between the Afghan government, the neighbouring countries and the wider international community, few Afghans on the ground believe that the drugs business can be curbed."

Western delegation to Afghanistan spent hours discussing instability, corruption, drugs and the failure to build a viable nation state but from the back of our IED proofed land rovers and security convoys we miss much of the Afghanistan of the rumour bazaar. I knew nothing of the explosion of multimedia in Afghanistan where TV stations, press and bloggers comment on subjects as diverse as politics, religion, urban fashion, history, sexual orientation, forced marriages and child rape, cultural and ethnic diversity as well as changes in traditional social, religious and family values. Mobile phones are everywhere and critical to sharing news and information in a still largely illiterate country.

The Rumour Bazaar recognises the improved roads, clinics, schools and new shops and staff offering services to newly financially solvent Afghans. Working for an NGO or ISAF forces moves a poor family rapidly up the social hierarchy as incomes previously unthought-of are available. But what will happen to this new affluence when the west departs and these opportunities are no longer available? Ms Arbabzadah explores the problems for Afghanistan standing alone. She is clear that most ordinary people want clean water, electricity and jobs not the Sharia law offered by the Taliban. The great failure of the western allies and the Afghan government has been to make sufficient progress in offering hope that this can be achieved. In a country where the influences of Iran and Pakistan appears everywhere even in the debate as to its national language whether Iranian Persian Farsi, Afghan Persian Dari or Pashto can a coherent national identity take root?

At the end of this most enjoyable book there is a sad plea not to forget Afghanistan which Ms Arbabzadah describes as "too bewildering to comprehend". She asks the west not to give up on her country even when it disappears from the news. This is unlikely to happen. There is no doubt that 2014 will be an important year for Afghanistan, progress has been achieved by many brave Afghan citizens and ISAF forces who have fought the Taliban and its determination to drag the country backwards. Books such as this one offer the west a new perspective on Afghanistan one that will be needed to sustain public support for ongoing financial commitments. 2014 must be the year when Ms Arbabzadah chronicles the secret sub-cultures, hidden worlds and the everyday life of the absurd as an independent Afghanistan embraces the 21st century : A book that I feel confident will be as eye opening as this one.