

Book Review

***The Taliban: Ascent to Power*
by M.J. Gohari**

**Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2000.
158pp. Price: _____**

The rise of Taliban to power in Afghanistan has been one of the most controversial yet fascinating episodes of modern times. Cotemporary history has assumed new dimensions of interest and appeal in the context of this recent phenomenon appearing on world stage in the guise of a fundamentalist movement. A lot of literature has come up on the subject in the last few years, attempting to analyze the Taliban from various angles of study and research. In this regard M.J. Gohari's work *The Taliban: Ascent to Power* occupies a place of considerable significance mainly from the standpoint of evaluating them in terms of their definition, interpretation and implementation of "Islamic Law". The theme becomes all the more important and relevant since the propagators of this genre of faith represent and echo a part of Islam that has long been a matter of heated debate and dispute both within the Islamic religion and outside it. The overthrow of Mujahideen who in their own right represented Islam in battle as well as in the political and social areas, and also symbolized the highest values prescribed by Shariah, was an irony that has perplexed and bewildered the world. Waging of "Jihad" against fellow religionists obviously meant that the Taliban did not agree with the Mujahideen brand of Islam. But this put into serious question their own policies on gender, basic judicial system, education and fundamental individual rights, challenging the achievements of the world community especially on human rights and their universality.

M.J. Gohari, a Ph.D. from the University of Leeds and a teacher of Islam and Middle Eastern cultures at Oxford has come up with raising certain very pertinent questions regarding the military, social and political presence of Taliban in Afghanistan. Contemporary developments have made his work very relevant too, opening up valid avenues of further research for intending scholars.

The book in its nine chapters makes an overall analysis of the Taliban rise to ultimate authority in Afghanistan along with an insightful account of the country's historical background tracing it from Islamic times. The author very briefly yet skilfully connects that perspective with the twentieth century Taliban phenomenon, though a more descriptive rather than an analytical style of writing leaves much to be desired more particularly in the first part. However, details of the leading men among the Mujahideen from whom the Taliban claim to have emerged, and the various political factors they came to represent the religio-political structure of Afghanistan, definitely contributes much to readers' information and channelizes his interest to fruitful directions.

The Taliban phenomenon cannot be fully understood without a truly deep and insightful grasp over the theological foundations of their movement. At this point the author makes an interesting observation with regard to the difference in interpretation of Islamic faith that sets them apart from the other major groups and the difference of the basic ethos of Islamic creed. This distinction defines the core of the Taliban superstructure of belief and faith and renders the gap between them and the Mujahideen "so deep that they could easily treat each other as non-Muslims" – one a diehard religious force seeking to impose their ideas and ideals on the rest and the other thought to be ruthless and more flexible towards modernity and its manifestations. M.J. Gohari has also linked the mainsprings of Taliban religious thought to certain outside socio-political influences such as the Iranian and Saudi models of political rule. He has done so in an impressive setting of tracing the roots of major caliphates in the history of Islam.

The book is a remarkable contribution to the already existing literature on the subject but its merit increases manifold when one goes through the exclusive chapter on the economic agenda of the Taliban. A very good analysis of Islamic economy precedes the

pre-Taliban Afghan economic situation supported by statistics and relevant figures to highlight the priorities and preferences of the Taliban in connection with developmental projects and general uplift. It is indeed a unique and a thoroughly painstaking effort on the author's part that has provided useful data on Afghanistan's natural resources and its headway in the energy, transportation and communication sectors.

The violation of human rights under the Taliban regime that has raised unprecedented hue and cry all over the world, however, cannot be liberally accepted and here one tends to disagree with Gohari's exoneration of their acts when he says "this leadership cannot possibly combine its desire to keep its troops prepared to die for Islamic values and at the same time demonstrate liberal flexibility." The uncompromising hostility to all interference from outside and their responses to all international concerns in this matter have also made them more unacceptable or if one may say repugnant to civil societies. 'The UN-Taliban dilemma' gives a good exposition of this attitude. In the context of Afghanistan's neighbours and other regional powers, 'the export of their brand of Islam' also raised many pertinent questions and the author has brought to light this scenario with reference to countries like Iran, Pakistan, China, India and the Central Asian Republics. Mutual relationships of benefit and disadvantage have been skilfully handled from both angles.

The Taliban movement and its call for *Jihad* against evil forces came to be associated with one man – bin Laden. This book apart from its many merits gives a brief yet concise biographical sketch of this man, his mission, faith, conviction and above all his universal views in respect of the major international powers in particular the U.S. Current history and contemporary happenings have made this issue a burning topic on which the West is ready to sacrifice all but compromise none. For an understanding of the Taliban, their struggle, psyche and commitment, a study of bin Laden's profile is imperative. The author felt the need of it and has incorporated an informative account of the person and the agenda that he represents.

The book is written in a fluent, simple and descriptive style which can be admired in many ways. However, the author does not

make much effort to evaluate the phenomena critically and from an analytical standpoint. At places it also gives the impression of being highly opinionated. The history of the Taliban nevertheless becomes a familiar concept along with their economic, socio-political, theological and ideological ethos, the reader moves on. The conclusion in particular deserves credit which evaluates the movement from the very tough criteria of success and failure. Since the book was written before the fall the Taliban regime the merit of the work must, therefore, be unquestioningly accorded its due place as it predicts the outcome, visualizing the Taliban, if not moving towards doom, at least still "far from success". To weigh the scenario with a sober hindsight and a sharp foresight has thus been achieved well by the author. Contemporary history has risen to prove the validity of the argument.

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