

BY ROBERT J. BARRO

## DON'T BANK ON DEMOCRACY IN AFGHANISTAN



**SOLUTION:**  
The U.S. ought to think about accepting an efficient authoritarian regime that would offer political stability and improve the economy

**T**he military successes in Afghanistan have demonstrated the awesome technological prowess of U.S. air power. However, as the campaign evolves into a nation-building operation, we shall find that our skills in the social and political arena do not match our military talents. The U.S. vision for a postwar Afghanistan relies on the familiar recipes of democracy and massive foreign aid. Unfortunately, neither is likely to work effectively.

The Western ideal for representative democracy involves free, multiparty elections and maintenance of civil liberties. As Aristotle realized, and as the evidence from a large number of countries demonstrates, democracy is almost never sustained in a country that has income and education levels as low as those in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, Washington always recommends democracy, even to the poorest nations, and the results have included such failures as the new Congo and Haiti.

Freedom House's latest ratings place Afghanistan in the lowest categories for electoral rights and civil liberties. This lack of democracy corresponds to the predictions that I would make from the country's economic and social conditions. Given where Afghanistan is today, my statistical analysis implies that the chance a midrange democracy—characteristic at present of countries such as Turkey and Indonesia—will exist five years from now is less than 1%.

A major factor undermining the building of democracy in Afghanistan is low primary school attainment. In 1995, adults had an average of 0.8 years of formal schooling. Only Mali and Niger were lower among the 113 countries for which I have data. Even worse from the standpoint of democracy is the unequal treatment of males and females. In Afghanistan, adult males averaged 1.3 years of primary schooling, whereas females had only 0.3. The male-female ratio of more than 4 is the highest for the 104 countries for which I have these data. The next highest is for Pakistan, which had 1.8 years for males and 0.6 for females. However, poor treatment of women does not apply only to Islamic countries. For example, many non-Muslim countries in Africa have very high ratios of male-to-female schooling.

The lesson for the Bush Administration is that the U.S. ought not to plan for a postwar Afghanistan that has functioning democratic institutions. A more realistic plan would focus on finding, or at least accepting, an efficient authoritarian regime that would provide political

stability and improve economic conditions. Power sharing among local factions may conceivably be part of the picture, but the stability of this arrangement is doubtful for a country with Afghanistan's large number of fragmented ethnic groups.

Ethnic heterogeneity is a source of political instability in Afghanistan. A possible solution, probably too radical for Washington to contemplate, is to partition Afghanistan into several independent countries as a way to achieve greater homogeneity within each political jurisdiction. However, the transition to multiple states can itself promote violence, as is clear from the former Yugoslavia.

Foreign aid is a critical issue as well. Given the dire economic conditions in Afghanistan, a large amount of short-term assistance makes sense. The problem is that short-term help tends to evolve into long-term aid, which historically has not contributed to economic development. Instead of alleviating poverty or promoting economic growth, foreign aid has tended to sustain large, corrupt governments.

William Easterly argues in his recent book, *The Elusive Quest for Growth*, that the problem is not foreign aid per se, but rather the way in which aid programs relate to past performance. Basically, to qualify for American aid, a country has to mess things up. The reward for success is that a country "graduates" and becomes ineligible for future aid. The currently fashionable debt-relief programs work essentially in the same way. Easterly argues that the policy formula should be reversed: "As countries' incomes rise because of their favorable policies for economic growth, aid should increase in matching fashion." Unfortunately, aid givers are unlikely to adopt this hard-headed approach. In fact, Easterly's own reward for publicizing this and other radical reform proposals was to be encouraged to leave his research position at the World Bank.

The likelihood is that entrenched foreign aid will become part of Afghanistan's problems, rather than a piece of the solution. We can already see how warlords are stealing much of the grain being sent, bolstering their positions in the country. This will only get worse over time.

Someday, perhaps, we will become as hard-headed about the war on world poverty as we have become about the war on international terrorism. But for now, we seem to be relying on the soft weapons of democracy and foreign aid and these policies have failed time and again.

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