Review article

Pakistan between Allah and Army

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A history of the Pakistan army: wars and insurrections. By Brian Cloughley. Oxford, Karachi: Oxford University Press. 1999. 384pp. Index. Pb.: £10.99. ISBN 0 19 579015 4.

Islam, nationalism and the West: issues of identity in Pakistan. By Iftikhar H. Malik. Basingstoke: Macmillan. 1999. 360pp. Index. £47.50. ISBN 0 333 71834 8.

Language and politics in Pakistan. By Tariq Rahman. Oxford, Karachi: Oxford University Press. 1998. 2nd edn. 319pp. Index. Pb.: £10.00. ISBN 0 19 577999 1.

Pakistan: a modern history. By Ian Talbot. London: Hurst. 1999. 432pp. Index. £16.50. ISBN 1 85065 385 2.

There has been little so far to distinguish Pakistan's new military regime from its predecessors except its regard for 'man's best friend'. Many still recall with bemusement the moment in October 1999, some days after Chief Executive General Parwez Musharraf had staged his bloodless coup against former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, when foreign journalists seeking a timetable for the restoration of democracy were regaled instead by the antics of the Chief Executive's pet chihuahuas, Dot and Buddy. While some construed the event as a bold gesture by the outspokenly liberal Musharraf to defy the orthodox Muslim establishment's contempt for 'unclean' dogs, others were outraged by his attempt to reduce Pakistan's ever-deepening political malaise to the level of farce.

However, tempting as it is to mock the absurdity of Pakistan's politics and dismiss it as mere entertainment fuelled by strutting military dictators, sinister bureaucrats and corrupt politicians, it is no longer affordable. The emergence of Pakistan as a nuclear power in 1998 has brought a new urgency to the debate about the restoration of democratic rule. While there is of course no doubt that recent elected governments in Pakistan have plumbed even greater depths of

cynicism and venality, the fundamental issue is whether Pakistan can continue to allow its military leaders to dictate priorities that have already triggered two major wars with India (in 1965 and 1971) and could spark a nuclear conflict threatening more than one billion people living in the Indian subcontinent. The crippling poverty of the vast majority of Pakistan's citizens and the obscene disparities in wealth which characterize its sprawling cities have also made it extremely vulnerable to the forces of 'political Islam' with their ill-conceived programmes of social and economic regeneration.

Against this background, Pakistan's failure to develop either standards of political accountability or to evolve a civil society recognizably committed to pluralism and equity has been a growing concern. Four new books on Pakistan, three written since its newly acquired status as a nuclear power, seek to address these issues from distinct though related perspectives. Ian Talbot and Iftikhar Malik set the agenda by raising the wholly pertinent question of why Pakistan, despite the shared legacy of a common system of governance bequeathed by Britain to its former colonies in the Indian subcontinent, should have lagged so far behind India, which enjoys a resilient if imperfect democracy and a vigorous civil society.

Until recently, much of the difficulty in approaching this question arose from the division of scholarly labour between historians of Pakistan concerned with the minutiae of historical developments in the period before independence (1947), and political scientists preoccupied with analytical 'models' purporting to explain the inherent structural weakness of the new state. This, as both Talbot and Malik emphasize, did little to further our understanding. 'The abrupt termination of historical narratives in 1947', writes Talbot, 'has helped to obfuscate the continuities between the colonial and contemporary eras. Although Pakistan emerged as a new state with a new identity, its political culture and characteristics were profoundly influenced by historical inheritances from the colonial era' (p. 12). Malik also regrets this 'partitioned treatment of otherwise enduring processes and themes inherited from the Raj' (p. 46).

Talbot's masterful study effectively demonstrates the value of a historical approach in our understanding of contemporary Pakistan. As such it is a welcome addition to a growing list of works by scholars impatient with the artificial boundaries dividing the disciplines of history and political science, which hitherto separated the study of pre- and post-independence Pakistan.[1] Drawing on his detailed knowledge of British colonial administration, he shows how the legacy of 'vice-regalism', which accounts for the persistence of authoritarianism in Pakistani politics, can be traced directly to the priorities of the British security state which evolved in the north-western regions that were later to constitute Pakistan. These priorities were largely dictated by the threat of Russian expansion from Central Asia which, in turn, led to the strengthening of emergency laws and repressive police powers. At the same time, the annexation

[1] A. Jalal, *Democracy and authoritarianism in South Asia: a comparative and historical perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and A.Y. Samad, *A nation in turmoil: nationalism and ethnicity in Pakistan, 1937–58* (Delhi: Sage, 1995).

of the region almost a century after the establishment of British power elsewhere on the subcontinent meant that representative institutions were largely undeveloped. Thus, while local elites in other parts of British India were becoming increasingly impatient with authoritarian rule, their counterparts in the north-western regions remained oblivious to demands for democratic expression. This divergence was further sharpened by the colonial administration's policy of the co-option of local elites that yielded rich dividends, especially in Punjab, where it retarded the development of self-government and laid the foundations for a 'culture of clientelism'.

Other insidious forces also nourished the roots of authoritarianism in Pakistan. Talbot shows how the Pakistan Movement, spearheaded by the Muslim League, actively fostered 'a culture of political intolerance' in an attempt to erase conflicting Muslim regional identities. This was particularly marked during the 1940s when well-established Muslim regional parties in Punjab and Bengal (and to a lesser extent in Sind and the North West Frontier Province) threatened to undermine the notion of a supra-regional Muslim identity upon which the Muslim League and its leader, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, had predicated their claim to separate Muslim 'nationhood'. In these areas where Muslims were in a majority, Pakistan was a desirable option not so much because it promised to secure an equal share for Muslims in an all-India centre, but because it offered the prospect of real regional autonomy in which Muslims would be the dominant force. It was here in the Muslim majority provinces of British India, Talbot argues, that the League was forced to confront the implications of a potentially disastrous conflict of Muslim interests which threatened to expose the weakness of its 'two-nation' theory of history dividing Hindus from Muslims. The League's response was ruthlessly to suppress dissent and deem any expression of regional interest as illegitimate, thereby anticipating the pattern of future centre–province relations in independent Pakistan.

Two additional factors helped crystallize authoritarian tendencies in the League: first, Jinnah's own role, which encouraged the centralization of power; and second, the League's exclusive claim to represent Muslims in India.

Although Talbot recognizes that Jinnah set a dangerous precedent in the pre-partition period by insisting on concentrating power in his hands, he justifies this by relating it to Jinnah's drive to maintain a rigidly disciplined party. However, Talbot is less able to assess the consequences of Jinnah's actions (however short-lived) after independence, for the future course of democratic politics in Pakistan. This is regrettable, for it remains the case that the adulation and deference still accorded to Jinnah in Pakistan have deterred even the boldest of Pakistani scholars from coming to terms with his damaging influence in sanctioning political practices—whether the summary dismissal of elected governments (as in Sind and the North West Frontier Province in August 1947 and April 1948) or the refusal to recognize regional demands (as in the case of the Bengali language issue in 1948)—which have become commonplace features of authoritarian rule in Pakistan.

The awe in which Jinnah was held by many of his contemporaries in the League, and their unquestioning acceptance of his autocratic manner and contempt for the messy conduct of politics, inevitably raise questions about whether his style of leadership was propitious for a state already saddled with 'a tradition of bureaucratic authoritarianism' (Talbot, p. 64). The fact that Jinnah peppered his speeches with the rhetoric of liberty, equality and fraternity scarcely amounts to a rigorous test of his democratic credentials. (Most Pakistanis have routinely dismissed similar claims made on behalf of Gandhi and Nehru.) Nor is it enough to suggest that Jinnah's later homage to notions of equal citizenship constitute a sufficient indication of his commitment to democracy. Indeed, there is something curiously disingenuous about the leader of a movement ostensibly based on the fundamental differences between Muslims and non-Muslims declaring immediately after the creation of Pakistan that 'in course of time Hindus would cease to be Hindus and Muslims would cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as citizens of the State' (Talbot, p. 136).

The League's claim exclusively to represent Indian Muslims, which led to a curtailment of dissent, also helped shape what Talbot describes as Pakistan's 'political culture of intolerance'. He outlines in fine detail how 'the Muslim League crushed those who contested its hegemonic claims' (p. 92), namely Indian Muslims opposed to its separatist programme, and how this legacy substantially undermined the legitimacy of political opposition in the years immediately following the independence of Pakistan. Although extraneous factors, most notably tension with India and the support of the United States, helped tilt the balance in favour of the military–bureaucratic axis which discouraged debate, the influence of the League's stewardship of the Pakistan Movement significantly reinforced a political culture that stood against pluralism. Whether the roots of this culture were in the main historically determined as Talbot suggests or normatively defined by the broad currents of an Indo-Muslim tradition as I have argued elsewhere[2] remains a moot point open to discussion.

What is not in dispute is the corrosive effect of this culture upon the conduct of politics and the evolution of civil society in present-day Pakistan. Bereft of any model for 'consociational democracy', such as the one devised during the 1930s by the Unionist Party in Punjab, and lacking the learning experience gained by Congress, which had been forced to accommodate 'diverse groupings into an Indian participant democracy' (Talbot, p. 92), Pakistan's leaders quickly resorted to the 'politics of confrontation'. Talbot charts the steady destruction of democracy in Pakistan and convincingly demonstrates how even at key moments—the crises in East Pakistan in 1970–71 and in Sind in 1988–9—Pakistan's leaders consistently opted for confrontation over compromise. The pattern was to persist well into the 1990s when Pakistani politics degenerated to

[2] F. Shaikh, *Community and consensus in Islam: Muslim representation in colonial India, 1860–1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

'become a zero-sum game in which oppositions denied ruling parties any legitimacy and governments used selective accountability to harry and intimidate opponents' (Talbot, p. 287). Talbot's grim account of Pakistani politics in the years following the restoration of democracy in 1988 suggests that a process of formal democratization could not, in and of itself, have healed the damage inflicted by decades of authoritarian rule on state and society in Pakistan.

The reasons for this lie rooted in the fact that the democratization that followed the election of Benazir Bhutto in 1988 was almost entirely 'procedural', that is, restricted to mere vote-casting with little or no regard for the introduction of a wider participatory element in the exercise of power or the erosion of social inequalities. Even more crucially, as Talbot makes clear, is the fact that 'transitions unilaterally imposed by armed forces are at best likely to result in fragile democracies…which are more likely to produce a hybrid mix of electoral forms and authoritarianism' (p. 292). This has indeed been true since 1988 with every single civilian government being forced to curry favour with the army upon which it depended for its survival. The corruption and clientelism that ensued reached deep into the bowels of civil and military institutions, brutalizing their rank and file.

The damage to Pakistan's fragile social fabric was equally devastating. For the first time, civil society faced dangers from within, pervaded as it was by what Talbot describes as 'an atmosphere of bigotry, fanaticism and distorted values' (p. 286). Malik also draws attention to the threats posed 'by components of civil society itself' (p. 125). The deadly and systematic attacks on Christian minorities which intensified under the Bhutto government in 1994–5 and the violent sectarian conflict between Shi'as and Sunnis under the Sharif administration in 1997–8 testify to the prevailing culture of intolerance. The emergence of a particularly virulent form of linguistic ethno-nationalism currently sweeping parts of urban Sind—a topic considered at some length by Tariq Rahman—also points to a culture unable to come to terms with pluralism.

This tension between the hegemonic claims of Pakistan's Islamic identity and the demands of its plural society is one of the themes explored in more detail by Malik, for whom the issue is linked to the brutal termination in 1947 of an Indo-Muslim intellectual renaissance before it 'could actualize into something consensual' (p. 38). Although the Indian Muslim poet–philosopher, Muhammad Iqbal, made a substantial contribution towards formulating the ideal of 'a trans-regional [Indo-Muslim] identity' predicated upon 'the principles of plurality and distributive justice' (Malik, p. 110), the debate quickly lost momentum under the combined pressure of Pakistan's 'internal problems of governance' and its 'difficult relations with India' (p. 261). This precipitated 'an ideological battle' over 'the composition and orientation of the state in Pakistan' that continues to the present day (p. 114).

There is no doubt that the absence of 'a tangible [national] self-definition' (Malik, p. 38) and unresolved questions about the merits (or indeed the possibility) of incorporating Islamic laws into a modern state have led to 'the

undue emphasis on a narrow Islamic identity' at the expense of a more 'diffused Pakistani identity' (Malik, p. 119). This reached absurd proportions under General Zia whose brutal programme of Islamization in the 1980s, far from imparting ideological cohesion or strengthening national integration, actually unleashed primordial loyalties, centred on ethnic and sectarian affiliations. As Malik observed in an earlier study: 'Pakistan was at its worst time, nationalism lay bruised, people turned to earlier identities and the state was triumphant in its ascendancy over its own people and institutions.'[3]

At the same time, Malik is adamant that what little hope there is of restoring a process of accountability in Pakistan lies with civil society. He shows how a beleaguered press, judiciary and human rights organizations have strenuously resisted (though not always with success) the encroachment on individual and institutional rights, and have emerged as the best guarantors of a consensual democracy. This is reflected not only in their vigorous opposition to Sharif's attempt in 1997 to pack the courts with political appointees but also to recent demands by parties on the extreme right to legitimize discrimination against religious minorities, namely Shi'as and Christians (Talbot, pp. 137–42). For Talbot also, 'the increas[ed] concern with corruption and religious bigotry in the national discourse is in part rooted in the strengthening of the institutions of civil society' (p. 290), which followed the rise of an urban middle class.

What this seems to point to is an increasing awareness among experts on Pakistan that the impetus for change in the direction of greater accountability is more likely to come from civil society than from the existing political establishment. According to Talbot, two critical tasks face Pakistan's democratizers: to encourage consociationalism and to 're-establish civilian supremacy over the armed forces' (p. 292). Of these the second is by far the more important, if also the more formidable. As Brian Cloughley's study confirms, the Pakistan army's political stake in maintaining the status quo in the period 1947–97 was immense. This continues to be the case, as was demonstrated in the summer of 1999 when a fragile *rapprochement* with India was rudely concluded by the army which, fearful of losing its status and power, engaged in a disastrous border clash with India in Kashmir that almost triggered an all-out war. The army's penchant for adventurism has been rendered all the more dangerous by fundamental changes in patterns of recruitment since the early 1980s, which, as Cloughley shows, has led to a steady rise in the influence of an officer class for whom 'cleaning up the [political] mess' has become synonymous with the imposition of a 'clean' Islamic regime.

More than fifty years after independence, Pakistan is still constrained by an army whose hold on the country's politics has been nothing short of catastrophic. This influence has been secured not so much as the result of domestic chaos generated by politicians (though this is still common currency in

[3] I. Malik, *State and civil society in Pakistan: politics of authority, ideology and ethnicity* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. 74.

thinking about Pakistan), but by the lack of a workable relationship with India. It is here that the institutions of civil society can play a vital part by questioning choices dictated by military adventurism and increasing pressure for a radical re-evaluation of the foreign policy priorities that have given the army the edge in national politics.

For too long now Pakistan has concentrated on acting as the would-be standard-bearer of the Muslim world at the expense of developing a working relationship with India. Malik's assessment of Pakistan's involvement in the Afghan civil war, its attempts to compete with Iran and Turkey in seizing the initiative in the Muslim republics of Central Asia, and its backing for Muslim extremists in Kashmir, all point to a strategy that justifies the enhancement of defence capability at the expense of the economic and political welfare of the country. If Pakistan is successfully to assume its status as a nuclear power without endangering the survival of millions of people in the Indian subcontinent, it must turn away from futile and grandiose schemes to lead the Muslim world and focus instead on exploring the possibilities of detente with India.

Central to any *rapprochement* with India is the resolution of the Kashmir dispute. It may well be that Pakistanis must now think the unthinkable on Kashmir and accept that their economic and political well-being can no longer be made subservient to the interests of India's long-suffering Kashmiri population. While there is no denying that Kashmir is a profoundly emotive issue with strong historical and ideological overtones for many Pakistanis, it is time for those who oppose any narrowing of Pakistan's national identity (by resisting, for example, appeals by militant Sunni parties to declare Pakistan a Sunni state) also to make a case against any undue enlargement of that identity. As Malik emphasizes, Pakistan 'was never projected as the total solution for the entire Muslim South Asian community' (p. 111). Many Pakistanis have come to accept gradually that their interests and those of the millions of Muslims who rejected the 'Muslim homeland' in favour of India, or an independent Bangladesh, did not necessarily coincide. What Pakistanis may now have to consider is whether they should also cease to assume an identity of interest with the people of Kashmir that could threaten the very survival of Pakistan in the event of a nuclear war with India.

There is no under-estimating the obstacles that lie in the way of any genuine movement towards a reappraisal of relations with India. The army's grip on power remains firm, and while it is still too early to say what Musharraf's regime holds in store, its promise of 'stability, credibility, transparency and accountability' is unlikely to include any blueprint for *rapprochement* with India that would undermine its control over national politics. However, the emergence in Pakistan of a growing number of interest groups and non-governmental organizations committed to re-thinking national priorities may hold the key to change. Among these are burgeoning peace movements, such as the Action Committee Against the Arms Race and the Joint Action Committee for People's Rights, which are becoming increasingly vociferous in their opposition to a

subcontinental arms race that continues to act as a brake on genuine political participation by marginalized groups, including minorities, women, and the rural and urban poor. It is these groups, fighting for more responsible government within the broad framework of regional peace and cooperation with India, which really deserve the support of the international community.