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Pakistan, The Garrison State: Origins, Evolution, Consequences (1947-2011)

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Book Reviews

Pakistan, The Garrison State: Origins, Evolution, Consequences (1947-2011). Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press. 494 pages. ISBN 978-0-19-906636-0. \$45.00. Ishtiaq Ahmed. 2013.

There is a plethora of academic literature on the political character of the Pakistani state and how it has evolved into its current format, or more broadly on the state-making process and state behavior in Pakistan. Here, key works include *Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military* (Haqqani, 2005), *Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan's Military Economy* (Siddiqi, 2007), *Making Sense of Pakistan* (Shaikh, 2009), and *Pakistan: A Hard Country* (Lieven, 2011). The noteworthy advantage of *Pakistan, The Garrison State*, written by a prominent area expert, is that it provides an interesting addition to this vast and rich body of work rather than a mere recycling of what is already available, a trap many case study specialists end up falling into.

The originality of the book has been greatly enhanced by the selection of an intriguing conceptual and theoretical lens—the “garrison state” or “fortress of Islam” metaphor—through which the author tries to delve into the complexity of Pakistani politics and history. Though a primarily liberal perspective echoing the famous “mullah-military alliance” (Akhtar, Amirali, & Raza, 2006), the concept helps expose some of the significant but barely visible undercurrents and intricacies of the state formation process in the South Asian country. The thrust of the book, in sum, concerns the functionality of the military as the most powerful veto player in Pakistan and its ideological as well as instrumental alignment with the religious right ever since the nation was born in the mid-20th century.

The work significantly explicates why the “fortress” narrative has proved so resilient and acquired, over time, such pathological proportions as to turn Pakistani state into more of “an army with a nation” rather than the other way around, with religion utilized as an ideological glue between the two. Obsessive nuclearization is one significant manifestation of the “fortress” mentality and its endurance. This fixation was set in motion with the politics of “eating grass” under Zulfakar Ali Bhutto in 1970s (Khan, 2012) and has ever since been pursued with unabated enthusiasm at the expense of much-needed economic development and infrastructural construction. This is a mindset that has been nourished, among other things, by the widely propagated belief in the existence of a grand “*Hanud-Yahud-Ansara*” (“Indian-Jewish-Christian”) conspiracy to reduce this sole nuclear Muslim nation to nothingness.

Chronologically ordered, the volume consists of 18 articles ranging a time span of over six decades from 1947 when Pakistan, as a Muslim-majority state, came into existence during the partition of British India and up until 2011 when the Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden was killed by American forces in the

northeastern Pakistani city of Abbottabad. Thematically, it covers a broad array of topics including the four wars or major conflicts between India and Pakistan (the first Kashmir war of 1947–1948, the 1965 war over Kashmir again, the civil war of 1971 and the independence of Bangladesh, and the Kargil “mini-war” of 1999), the military coups as defining moments of political change and governance, heavy Pakistani involvement in the Afghan jihad during the long reign of General Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq (1977–1988) and its enduring impact on state-society relations in Pakistan itself, and the state’s historical relations with India, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. The novelty of the scholarly contribution stands out in the first chapter (pp. 1–27) with a focus on the “garrison state” conceptual framework, the third chapter (pp. 49–64) delineating the “colonial roots” of the Pakistani army and how it came to politically engulf other components of the state, and in the eleventh and twelfth chapters (pp. 230–279) that probe the consolidation of religious militarism under General Zia.

While the theoretical line of thinking runs through the whole work in a more or less consistent fashion, some parts of the final chapters lack depth, touching on almost anything and everything related to the issue at hand. At these junctures, the work experiences a theoretical rupture and loses the analytical gravity provided by the pivotal “fortress of Islam” framework. A vivid example of this can be found on pages 432–433, where the author suddenly breaks a U.S.-Pakistani-centered thread of argument and incorporates a brief free-floating paragraph about Indo-Pakistani relations with special reference to Nawaz Sharif’s alternative attitude toward India. Moreover, a number of chapters in the book are concluded by interviews with senior Pakistani officials and generals (mostly retired) on the specific subjects under consideration. While this approach might have been intended to serve as an innovative substitute for a conclusion, it would have been better to have integrated these conversations into the text in a coherent and relevant manner.

Nonetheless, the work’s principal deficiency is basically a matter of content rather than that of format. First, while it is relatively rich on Islamabad’s deployment of militancy as an instrument of foreign policy making and for the purposes of attaining “strategic depth,” it is conspicuously light on the nuclear dimensions of statecraft and security governance in the South Asian nation. Pertinently, Pakistan has not only employed nuclear capability as “the ultimate deterrent” against a perceived threat from its southeastern neighbor, but is also expanding it as “the ultimate equalizer” in a costly attempt to place itself on an equal footing with India in the national psyche as well as in the international eyes. After all, Islamabad’s continues to be “the fastest-growing nuclear arsenal in the world” (Riedel, 2011, p. vii) despite the fact that it has arguably passed a reliable level of minimum deterrence demonstrated by India’s remarkable restraint in retaliation against the 2001 militant assaults on its parliament and particularly the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks (Narang, 2009/2010, p. 38), both of which were conducted by Islamabad-affiliated Pakistani militants. However, to understand such intricacies concerning the nuclear politics of Pakistan, readers will have to look elsewhere.

Second, while the historical origins and sociopolitical as well as security implications of military dominance in Pakistan are well investigated and

scrutinized, it is not at all explained why such dominance that underlies the “garrison state” has, since the birth of the nation, taken a perceptibly “revisionist” rather “status quo” form, with India as the chief target of that revisionism. Arguably, over three of four Indo-Pakistani wars (1947, 1965, 1971, and 1999) have been provoked or otherwise initiated by the Pakistani forces or militants affiliated with them, that is, by the junior or militarily inferior side of the pair. The 2001 militant assaults on the Indian parliament as well as the 2008 Mumbai terror incident could also be seen as another two “asymmetric” expressions of this revisionism. The salience of Pakistan’s revisionist proclivity in this framework would manifest itself more prominently if we maintained that revisionism and militarism reinforce and thus reproduce each other over time. The book, however, does not tell us much about this characteristic tendency, why it appears to be an important feature of the Pakistani “garrison state” captured implicitly by such epithets as “the warrior state” (Paul, 2014), its political-psychological dynamic, and/or its historical root causes.

In spite of the aforementioned shortcomings, Ishtiaq Ahmed’s book—*Pakistan, The Garrison State*—is a robust and reliable work of scholarship built on a solid and intriguing theoretical basis. It is not only essential reading for students and scholars of Pakistani politics, but is also highly recommended to politicians and policymakers seeking deep insights into South Asian history. Ahmed’s key accomplishment lies in his successful effort to enlighten us on a salient yet largely neglected dimension of a case that is highly complicated yet almost satiated with commentary and analysis.

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