

The Fierce Pressures Facing Pakistan

THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS, 16 March 2015

Ahmed Rashid

The Struggle for Pakistan: A Muslim Homeland and Global Politics by Ayesha Jalal Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 435 pp., \$35.00

The Army and Democracy: Military Politics in Pakistan by Aqil Shah Harvard University Press, 399 pp., \$35.00

Discontent and Its Civilizations: Dispatches from Lahore, New York, and London by Mohsin Hamid Riverhead, 226 pp., \$27.95

Midnight's Furies: The Deadly Legacy of India's Partition by Nisid Hajari Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 311 pp., \$28.00 (to be published in June 2015)

1.

No one should be surprised to read that in Pakistan the army has taken charge, established military courts, derailed democracy, brought television and other media under military control. Nor should one be surprised to learn that foreign policy and national security were being directly run by the army. Many similar situations have occurred in Pakistan since 1958, when the army first came to power in a gradual coup, declared martial law, and ruled for a decade. The country has for years been under partial military rule, outright martial law, or military authority disguised as presidential rule.

But the arrangement that has evolved over the last six months is the strangest so far: the elected government remains in place but has few powers, and no longer rules the country. The media, opposition political parties, Parliament, and the intelligentsia are trying to resist the gradual military takeover but they are weak and ineffectual.

The single worst legacy of military rule since the 1970s, the time of the loss of East Pakistan—now Bangladesh—has been a ruinous foreign policy that has made enemies out of most of Pakistan's neighbors owing to the safe havens that Islamic extremists from these countries have carved out in Pakistan. It is well known that such havens exist in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province and Balochistan, but they are also located in many other parts of the country, from Lahore near the Indian border to the Khyber Pass into Afghanistan.



Because of its fear of India, Pakistan has been turned into a garrison state with a persisting paranoia about being surrounded by hostile countries and dominated by a demanding, belligerent United States. Yet the Pakistani army is the seventh-largest in the world with some 642,000 soldiers, 500,000 reserves, and an arsenal of 120 nuclear weapons. Still, since September 11, 2001, the army has often been ineffectual. Pakistani extremists have killed up to 30,000 Pakistani civilians and 15,000 members of the Pakistan military. Pakistan is living in the midst of a partially self-created bloodbath of terrorism that is more comparable to Iraq and Nigeria than to India or Bangladesh.

That is one side of the picture. Another, equally true and supported by many, is that between periods of military rule Pakistan has generally declined under incompetent and corrupt elected governments whose politicians depend on patronage, bribes, and a backward feudal culture to retain their seats in Parliament while making sure that true democratic institutions never take root. Bereft of plausible leaders, the political class has for decades failed to articulate a vision for Pakistan; it has been unable to lift the country from its economic morass, wage its own war against Islamic extremism, and convince the military that coups were no longer necessary because civilians can govern effectively. The army, for its part, has frequently undermined elected governments, thereby rendering military coups that much easier.

Today the army, or so some of its advocates claim, may be about to embark on an altogether different and more productive strategy. It took virtual charge of the government following the appalling Taliban attack on an army school in Peshawar on December 16, 2014, in which 145 students and teachers were killed, many of them the children of soldiers. Pakistani politicians say that the problem of terrorism was created by the military, which tolerated and in some cases supported the Islamist extremists and their allies, and only the military can crush or control them. That is what it is promising to do now.

Any such effort faces a very complex challenge. First, the army has directly supported a variety of violent groups fighting wars in Afghanistan, Kashmir, and Central Asia; it thereby hoped to gain influence in each place. There are also dozens of foreign groups who receive no support from the army but have built up safe havens and sanctuaries in Pakistan as a result of the country being unable to police its borders. The extremist groups now hiding in Pakistan come from Iran, India, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, China, Russia, Chechnya, and many Arab states. They include al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Uighur East Turkestan Islamic Movement, and the Iranian groups Jundullah and Jaish ul-Adl. This list does not include several Baloch separatist groups fighting for a separate Balochistan homeland. According to estimates by most experts, between one quarter and one third of Pakistan has been turned into “no-go” areas by these groups.



The top military leaders now say that they have gotten the message and they promise to control all such organizations. Last year Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif insisted that the Taliban could be appeased by talks. The army’s chief, General Raheel Sharif (no relation), disagreed. In June the army, frustrated by the heavy casualties it suffered in fighting with the Pakistani Taliban, forced Prime Minister Sharif to support two major offensives in the North Waziristan and Khyber tribal regions bordering Afghanistan. The army cleared nearly 800,000 civilians from North Waziristan before it began bombing runs. Those offensives against the Pakistani Taliban and others have still not had much success, despite their having killed 1,500 extremists of different nationalities.

The school massacre in Peshawar late last year led General Sharif to demand much greater political support and a more determined pursuit of the war against terrorism from the government. In late December, he presided over a ten-hour meeting with all political parties in which they reached an agreement to reinstate the death sentence for terrorism; to amend the constitution to set up military courts for two years to try terrorists; and to strengthen a centralized national security agency, including all military and civilian intelligence agencies.

Military courts are opposed by many Pakistanis because they have in the past led to the imposition of martial law and have been used to intimidate politicians. However, the criminal justice system has broken down and there has been no attempt by the government or the senior judiciary to carry out reforms or modernize either the decrepit state prosecution service or the methods of police investigation. Judges and lawyers were easily threatened and often killed by terrorists. The military courts will now try some 3,400 suspected terrorists. A “National Action Plan” to defeat terrorism was also agreed on at the ten-hour meeting. This includes plans to regulate the 20,000 registered and 40,000 unregistered madrasas, or religious schools, where three million children are enrolled.

Many of them teach a jihadist curriculum that the army hopes to moderate. The Islamic parties in Parliament—they hold less than 5 percent of the seats—naturally oppose any such move. So far there is no effective program to reeducate the tens of thousands of young radicals and provide them with new skills, new programs of study, and job prospects.

The future of Pakistan hangs in the balance, while its stability remains critical to global security. Two of the important books under review sum up what is at stake. Aqil Shah writes in *The Army and Democracy: Military Politics in Pakistan*:

“The military is at the center of the international community’s three most serious and interlinked concerns about Pakistan: the war-prone conflict with India, the jihadi threat, and the security of its nuclear weapons. The army sustains the ruinous security competition with India, directly or indirectly facilitates Islamic extremism and terrorism by harboring militant groups as a tool of foreign policy, and exclusively controls the country’s nuclear weapons.” Ayesha Jalal, a much-praised historian of Pakistan, takes a long-term view in *The Struggle for Pakistan*:

“The rise of the military to a position of enduring dominance within Pakistan’s state structure is the most salient development in the country’s history and has deeply influenced its subsequent course....The suppression of democratic rights during extended periods of military rule wreaked havoc on political processes and the delicate weave of Pakistani society.... An overwhelming fear of continued chaos and violence, if not outright disintegration, has made it difficult to arrive at balanced assessments of a disturbing present in order to plan for the future.”

2.

The central question is whether the army will seriously confront extremism or whether it will continue to play its familiar double game. That game has meant accepting some of the West's demands to fight terrorism while selectively supporting some militant groups, especially those fighting India. Visiting Islamabad on January 13, US Secretary of State John Kerry made it clear that he wanted concrete reforms and would no longer trust assurances. In the National Action Plan the army and the government jointly articulated for the first time a common program against extremism, but the army has to first confront and get rid of some its contradictory policies.

For years the military has followed a policy of distinguishing between “good” and “bad” Taliban—the bad being those who attack the army while the good include the Afghan Taliban who kill only Americans or fellow Afghans. General Sharif now repeatedly says that all terrorists will be treated alike. Recently, acting like a de facto foreign minister, he has visited London, Washington, Kabul, Beijing, and the Arabian Gulf states to deliver the same message. This is the closest the army will come to admitting or apologizing for its past policies. No public acknowledgments will be made. The army leaders have also begun a long-overdue process to improve relations with Afghanistan and gain the trust of its new president, Ashraf Ghani. The Pakistani army is loathed by the Afghans for supporting the Afghan Taliban in the past and allowing its leader, Mullah Omar, to remain in Pakistan ever since September 11. General Sharif claims that he is now looking at ways to set up talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government, end the Taliban sanctuary in Pakistan, and so end the war in Afghanistan. In return he wants to eliminate the bases that the Pakistani Taliban have set up in Afghanistan.

China, Pakistan's closest ally, is secretly and critically involved in these arrangements. It recently welcomed a Taliban delegation in Beijing and urged its members to open talks with President Ghani. It has also gotten tough with the Pakistani army because hundreds of Chinese Muslims, or Uighurs, are fighting with the Taliban in Afghanistan and launching attacks in China's Xinjiang region. However, relations with India remain extremely tense—partly because the right-wing government in New Delhi refuses to talk to Pakistan, but largely because many of the most dangerous enemies of the Indian army are established in the Pakistani province of Punjab, which borders on India. According to the Pakistani interior minister, ninety-five groups in the Punjab—many of them armed and trained in the past by the Pakistani army's InterServices Intelligence (ISI)—are determined to wage endless jihad against India and retake the disputed territory of Kashmir.

The largest extremist group, Lashkar- e-Tayyaba (LET), functions like a regular party and its leaders appear on television and organize mass meetings—both would be impossible without the permission of the ISI. Much to the anger of India and the US, Pakistan has also been procrastinating on the trial of seven senior LET militants accused of planning the attack on Mumbai in 2008 that killed 164 people, including six Americans. Another Punjab-based Sunni extremist group, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, has been killing Shias and non-Muslim minorities in Pakistan, yet its leaders are free.



Punjab is the heartland of Pakistan, the source of 70 percent of the army's recruits, but its proximity to India has made it terrorism's front line. In late January as President Obama visited Delhi and US pressure to control jihadists increased, Pakistan imposed a ban on LET. General Sharif's message is that he will deal with the subversive forces in the Punjab, but one target at a time. Many Pakistanis want to believe him. General Sharif's biggest task is to ensure the loyalty of the army. Rogue Pakistani soldiers have taken part in numerous attacks by the Pakistani Taliban on military targets. Some serving and some retired members of Pakistan's military have given valuable secret information to the Pakistani Taliban. Most of the two dozen convicted terrorists who have been hanged in Pakistan so far were formerly members of the Pakistani military. General Sharif's claims that he will not compromise are being put to a difficult test and it's far from certain he can carry them out.

3.

Until the 1980s there was a severe lack of Pakistani scholars writing knowledgeably about their own country. The most widely read authors on Pakistan were foreigners. However, during the past two decades rich, carefully researched, complex, and definitive political histories written by Pakistanis such as Farzana Shaikh, Hussain Haqqani, Hasan-Askari Rizvi, and others have received respectful international attention. Ayesha Jalal has been one of the first and most reliable political historians. She carried out intensive research to decipher Pakistan's early history in books starting with *The Sole Spokesman* (1985), her account of the founding of Pakistan. Since then she has produced one strong book after another, focusing critically on what she called the "State of Martial Law."

Her latest book both contains new material and sums up her past work. She recently wrote an emotional and deeply moving book on Saadat Hasan Manto, the renowned Urdu fiction writer, who was also her great-uncle. That book seems to have mellowed her, making *The Struggle for Pakistan* her most accessible work to date. It has humor, pathos, gossip, quotations from Urdu poetry, carefully selected photographs, and includes her personal reactions to events. "Forced to imbibe the truths of officialdom," she writes, "many of [Pakistan's] literate citizens have opted for the comforts of ignorance, habits of skepticism, and, most troubling of all, a contagion of belief in conspiracy theories.... Pakistanis today are despondent."

She is especially telling when she points to the lack of serious academic or political debate in Pakistan about the role of the military. She writes of the "institutional imbalances" that have led to this neglect of central issues and "the supremacy of the nonelected over the elected." Such failures, in her view, have been more detrimental to the country than regional and ethnic differences. Nor was the military, as it claimed, intervening to save a broken-down system in 1958. Rather it exploited political differences to its advantage, "with British and American blessings." However, she writes too briefly about the deep and unquestioned stake of the military in the Pakistani economy, which is now perhaps its most important source of income, power, and longevity. That profitable connection also explains why the army is unwilling to yield to civilian power. It runs banks, industries, vast housing projects, and the largest transport and construction companies in the country. It still does not allow Parliament to make a full disclosure of the annual military budget.

Aqil Shah, a Pakistani scholar currently teaching at Princeton, has also recently published a history of Pakistan, but writes in greater detail about the role of the generals at each stage of every crisis. He points out that both Pakistan's founder, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, and its first prime minister, Liaquat Ali Khan, helped create the specter of an aggressive India that was determined to break up the fledgling state of Pakistan.

The first war with India over Kashmir took place in 1948, just a few months after Pakistan gained independence, and had several effects that became critical in future decades. A crash development of military power accounted for 70 percent of total government expenditure during the first three years of Pakistan's existence. Today about one quarter of the annual budget goes to the military. During the 1948 war the government used Pashtun tribal mercenaries to capture part of Kashmir and hold off Indian forces. By the 1980s those mercenaries had become Islamic militants and were taking a serious part in military planning. When General Pervez Musharraf launched the disastrous war in Kargil in Indian Kashmir in 1999, he used paramilitary forces made up of local tribespeople—much as the Pakistani generals did in the war of 1948.

Finally, according to Shah, the 1948 war affected the political attitudes of the first generation of young Pakistani army officers, who developed a hatred for India, a contempt for civilians, and a firm belief in the superiority of the army, all of which led to the first military coup in 1958. That generation had deep contempt for Bengalis and thus contributed to the loss of East Pakistan in 1971. Shah writes that, paradoxically, the more professional the military became, the more it distanced itself from civilian governments that it considered corrupt and parochial and the more it believed in a centralized authoritarian state, thereby deepening the division between civilians and the military. Shah does not deal adequately with how the army's involvement in Afghanistan over decades, even more than the conflict with India, has radicalized officers and soldiers and Islamized the army's own ideology. Nor does he provide us with a sufficiently close description of how the relationship between the army and the all-powerful Inter-Services Intelligence bureaucracy actually works.

In his most revealing contribution he gives an account of the education of army officers at the National Defense University, the premier university in the country. I lectured there for many years until General Musharraf, the military ruler, had me banned because I opposed his views on foreign policy. Whereas twenty years ago officers heard a variety of views from a broad spectrum of lecturers, lecturers must now adhere to a single official view on national security. Shah writes that out of a total of 987 hours of instruction, student officers "attend just one two-hour lecture on the constitution of Pakistan by a civilian legal expert." It is unlikely that the two books I have been describing will be studied at the NDU or will be part of the discussions on national security there. If General Sharif is to truly make a difference in the army and move the country toward a more rational security strategy, his officers should be seriously studying Pakistani history and the economic and political problems facing the country. Civilians should also have a much greater part in creating national security policy.

4.

Pakistan has produced impressive novelists writing in English in recent years. The books of Mohammed Hanif, Kamila Shamsie, Daniyal Mueenuddin, and Nadeem Aslam recall the rise of Indian fiction two decades ago. These writers are young, largely Western-educated, and some live in the West. Yet the continuing crisis in Pakistan and the conflict of the army with civil society has made them take an intense interest in politics and society. Unlike other novelists or their Indian counterparts, they frequently write outspoken newspaper columns. Already a second generation of even younger Pakistani novelists is emerging, such as Saba Imtiaz and Bilal Tanweer, who are equally politically aware. It is not surprising that Mohsin Hamid, one of the most successful and inventive young novelists, has published a collection of his columns, *Discontent and Its Civilizations: Dispatches from Lahore, New York, and London*, which follows his latest novel, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*. He writes of his marriage and children, his own work as a novelist, and comments on politics, terrorism, and the plight of minorities and women. His self-deprecating and

witty tone is utterly engaging.

“The notion that the personal and the political are inescapably intertwined was one I continued to hold strongly,” he writes. In an essay describing sixty years of Pakistan he finds that “we have been our own worst enemies. My wish for our national anniversary is this: that we finally take the knife we have turned too often upon ourselves and place it firmly in its sheath.”

Every generation of Indians and Pakistanis should confront a fresh account of the partition of the subcontinent in 1947. In *Midnight's Furies*, Nisid Hajari has provided his own insights into its bloody history. Between one and two million people were killed in ethnic and religious conflict in just a few weeks and some 14 million people were displaced along the India-Pakistan border. There has never been a full and careful account of the tragedy and no monuments to the victims have ever been erected. In Nisid's account we read:

"Gangs of killers set whole villages aflame, hacking to death men and children and the aged while carrying off young women to be raped.... Pregnant women had their breasts cut off and babies hacked out of their bellies; infants were found literally roasted on spits."

Hajari's book is a superb and highly readable account of not just the mayhem, but the political machinations that preceded Partition, including the three-way negotiations between Britain and the leaders of what were to become India and Pakistan. He shows how the Indian army was divided into Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs and then divided again between India and Pakistan: The Indian army, which was to be divided up between the two countries, had trained and fought as one for a century. Top officers...refused to look on one another as potential enemies. Just a few nights earlier both Hindu and Muslim soldiers had linked arms and drunkenly belted out the verses of "Auld Lang Syne" at a farewell party in Delhi.

Field Marshall Sir Claude Auchinleck, who had established a joint border force in Punjab to try to contain the killings, ultimately divided the army with tears in his eyes. Hajari also sets out to discover how much Partition was responsible for the subsequent mistrust and enormous gulf between India and Pakistan. By, in effect, bringing Partition up to date, his book gains contemporary relevance. As long as India and Pakistan do not learn to live with each other, religious extremists on both sides will always have an excuse to destabilize the fragile status quo. Terrorism can potentially and fatally distort issues of war and peace between two nuclear powers—an unacceptable situation not only for the two peoples but for the world.

If Pakistan is to emerge from its downward trajectory it has to confront the awful realities of the past, the wrong course it has taken, and the question of how a decent future can be achieved. The recent killings in Paris and the public executions carried out by ISIS are intensifying global concerns about terrorism. Pakistan ignored similar warnings after September 11 and continued flirting with extremists. It cannot afford to do so again. —March 3, 2015
The Pity of Partition: Manto's Life, Times and Work Across the India-Pakistan Divide (Princeton University Press, 2013); reviewed in these pages by Ian Jack, October 23, 2014. ←*Riverhead*, 2013; reviewed in these pages by Pankaj Mishra, April 25, 2013. ←
© 1963-2015 NYREV, Inc.