

Failing State or Fragmented Hegemony: The Political Economy of Change in Pakistan

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The relationship between the Pakistani state and society is a complex and evolving one. It continues to be shaped by class, national oppression, patriarchy, caste-ism and the myriad legacies of colonialism. In his talk, Aasim Sajjad Akhtar argues that a classically dichotomized historical materialism is insufficient to capture the Pakistani condition. While the class structure has evolved considerably between the colonial and contemporary periods, the structure of power in Pakistan is still centred around patronage ties, even while the underlying bases of patron-client relations have been transformed. While patronage was based on the control over natural resources such as land and water under British colonialism, later regimes found themselves patronizing an intermediate class emerging out of the subordinate classes. In explaining these shifts, Akhtar uses a Gramscian framework of analysis to explore the shifting institutional dynamics of the state, the role of capital and the evolving bases of patronage within the political economy of Pakistan.

It is hard to pick a place to start a lecture on Pakistani state and society, in part because the dominant media and neo-liberal policy frames affect even what radicals can and should say. By this I mean only that I am always tempted to dedicate any talk on contemporary Pakistan to a critique of mainstream discourses. I think this is extremely important in the so-called 'age of terror', during which polarization between various segments of 'progressive' Pakistanis, both inside the country and in the diaspora, has become extremely acute. It is unfortunate that so many of those who would call themselves progressives accede to dominant media and policy representations, and in fact wilfully argue for 'civilising forces' such as NATO and – even more absurdly – the Pakistani military, to cleanse society of the 'infectious disease' that is religious ideology.

In fact, the endemic diseases that afflict Pakistani society are not, as liberals-claiming-to-be-progressives would have us believe, of a civilizational or cultural nature. Class, a neo-colonial state, national oppression, patriarchy and casteism continue to shape Pakistan's political economy as they have always done, albeit in ever-changing ways. The difference between the contemporary period and the heyday of left radicalism that persisted through the 1980s is that too many of us have ceased to pay attention to these stark and dynamic fault lines and, as per the dominant discourse, accepted that repelling the challenge of barely modern 'enemies of civilization' is the most urgent imperative of all.

That the millenarian right is as modern a political force as any in the contemporary world is accordingly lost in the rhetorical clouds that engulf us. Coping with the challenge that is the religious right requires us to at least accept this basic fact and more generally its sociological foundations, and, if we are actually seeking to build a political alternative, the right's obvious blind spots. A dispassionate analysis of the evolution, and of the politics of reactionary forces in contemporary Pakistan, necessarily means transcending the terribly misleading binary that everything secular is progressive and everything religious is reactionary. I am not suggesting that we be sympathetic to the religious right but only that we recognize that the secular right – in the form of the Muttahida

Qaumi Movement (MQM), for instance – is every bit of a threat to left radicals as the religious right.

But I will stop myself here from digressing further. I do hope to return to some of these thematic concerns through the course of the lecture; in the initial instance I wished only to flag what I believe to be broader polemical issues with which left radicals should concern themselves.

I make no apologies for presenting here a somewhat traditional historical materialist analysis of Pakistani state and society. I employ a Gramscian framework to elucidate my understanding of state and capitalism in Pakistan and the modes of politics that have become predominant over the past two to three decades. For me, Gramsci is a traditionalist; it is another matter altogether that a particular reading of Gramsci has come to animate so many ‘post-Marxist’ theoretical formulations over the past couple of decades.¹

Having said that, it is only fair to acknowledge that I depart from the birds-eye political economy formulations that have long dominated radical discussions of Pakistan. My PhD dissertation, from which I draw upon most of the arguments that I will present here, was a critical engagement with that most famous of Pakistani Marxists, Hamza Alavi, and his seminal theory of the over-developed post-colonial state. I think it is time that we were able to develop new theoretical insights beyond icons like Alavi, because we threaten to abandon the very tenets of historical materialism if we remain beholden to formulations that represent frontiers of knowledge that we have long since crossed.

Having said this, Alavi’s formulations have remained as influential as they have for as long as they have because much of what he wrote is, on the surface at least, still relevant. For instance, who would deny the power of the ‘military-bureaucratic oligarchy’ that Alavi (1972) claimed was the most influential of all interest groups in Pakistan by virtue of its mediating role? Or the fact that what he called the ‘metropolitan bourgeoisie’ – shorthand for economic imperialism – remains willing and able to hold state and society hostage to its dictates?

Yet Alavi’s structural Marxism is not able to account for much that has changed beneath the surface. His theoretical

formulations were relatively static, even though more obviously empirical accounts that he penned reflected the changing dynamics of power within the ruling bloc (1983; 1989).

However, the lack that I find most glaring is that there is no mention within Alavi's treatise about the working people upon whose exploitation the entire structure of power rests. Yes, the military, bureaucracy, landed and industrial classes, imperialist powers and multinational corporations rule the roost in Pakistan, but how is it that a system based on such flagrant injustice survives? After all, even the corporate media is happy to remind us on a regular basis just how discontented a vast majority of ordinary Pakistanis are with what is often described as a 'failed' – or close to failed – state.

Indeed, what my experiences both as an academic and as an engaged leftist over the past decade and a half have confirmed is that Pakistan's class structure is far more complex than is assumed in the classical dichotomies of the historical materialist canon. For starters, there is an intermediate strata which historically emerged through the development of secondary and tertiary sectors of the agrarian economy that is now the face of capitalist modernity in Pakistan. To return to where I began, it is this class that is the bedrock of the political and cultural movements of both the religious and secular right.

Anyone with more than a cursory interest in Pakistan's contemporary political economy must therefore grapple with a series of inter-related questions: who constitutes the country's ruling bloc; what political and cultural worlds do the variegated intermediate classes inhabit; and, perhaps most importantly of all, how and why do the subordinate classes consent to the rules of a game that they can never hope to win?

Indeed, beyond academic indulgences, anyone active on the left in Pakistan desiring to rebuild a vibrant and representative movement of working people, oppressed nationalities, women, deprived castes and the many different confessional groups outside the pale of 'official' Islam must confront these questions, and respond to the extremely challenging conditions – often encapsulated within the term

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‘informalisation’ – within which the most exploited segments of Pakistani society live and work.

It is in this broader political economy context that I locate my argument about subordinate class politics in contemporary Pakistan. I mentioned earlier that in comparison to a bygone era in which the left shaped much of what happened in the world, including Pakistan, there is today very little emphasis on understanding the structural realities of class, state, nation and so on that shape social life. I hasten to add that, until the later part of the twentieth century, the world and the way in which we understood it was also much simpler than what exists today. I will attempt to elucidate this complex structural universe by making a series of inter-related statements.

State

The Pakistani state, conceived as a ‘steel frame’ by its British makers, formally still resembles the entity that existed through the colonial period and in the first few decades after decolonization. Beneath the surface, however, many things have changed. The insularity of the civil service structure was irrevocably altered by the reforms initiated by the Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto regime in 1973, which had a direct impact on the class and ethnic composition of civilian state institutions. The elite – by which I mean the westernized, secular successors of the British – no longer dominate the bureaucracy, which is to say that the paternalism and idealism of the colonial state has given way to a no-holds-barred use of public office for the benefit of parochial groups (Kennedy 1988). In short, the civilian side of the steel frame has fragmented, and the ‘everyday’ or ‘shadow’ state looks and functions quite differently from the formal institutions that dominate academic discussions of Pakistan.² Popular discourse does acknowledge the actually existing state, but almost completely through the reductionist lens of ‘corruption’. A substantial body of scholarship on ‘corruption’ in the post-colonial world is now available to us, which confirms that the surface phenomenon must be understood in its proper historical context and with reference to political and economic

structures (cf Witsoe 2013; Blundo and Sardan 2006).

This is to say that ‘corruption’ is not something cultural and in fact has preceded the creation of Pakistan (cf Javid 2011). For all of its pretensions, the British ‘steel frame’ was hardly Weber’s impersonal ideal-type, and the *gora sahib*³ anything but the civilized liberal statesman that he claimed to be. Yet I want to emphasize that the above-mentioned changes in the composition, practice and self-perception of civilian state institutions that have taken place over the past three to four decades need to be understood in their own right. That is to say that the Pakistani state is not the same animal that it was, even if many of its fundamental impulses continue to harken back to the British Raj.

In part because of the fragmentation of the civil services and for a host of other reasons including the ‘garrison’ inheritance of the Pakistani state, the military arm of the ‘steel frame’ has become the face of the Pakistani structure of power. The men in khaki have retained the institutional insularity that the civil services have long since lost; they have also long been the self-anointed guardians of state ideology.⁴ Enough has been written about the military’s dominance – and the extent to which it has been undermined over the past few years – that I need not go into it here (Zaidi 2014; Akhter 2014). I am concerned here only with the fact that, insofar as the Pakistani state’s power is identified with the military, it is a primarily coercive power. Yes, the top brass never tires of invoking the fact that the institution is the guardian of the country’s ideological frontiers – and this is without doubt a defining feature of Pakistan’s political economy – but if we are interested in really understanding the dynamism of this structure of power, and particularly the forms of the state with which the subordinate classes come into contact on a daily basis, it is necessary to consider the hypothesis that the fragmented civilian – and policing institutions – that are often depicted as ‘corrupt’ and even ‘failing’ are the real sites where hegemony is fomented.

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Capital

In the story of modernity, including the peculiarly Pakistani version, the history of the state is of course inextricably tied

to the history of capital. Over the past three to four decades, the deepening of capitalist productive and exchange relations across the length and breadth of Pakistani society – with significant variations, of course – has not been given adequate attention by scholars on the left. This is odd, given how we so regularly invoke capitalism in our narratives. I dare say that, à la Alavi and other classic theorists, we neglect the dynamism of capital, including specific modes of politics that evolve alongside emergent classes such as the intermediate strata. In colonial history we often read about white-collar professionals who took up occupations in the government service or in private fields such as law, medicine and education, and then became active in the anti-colonial struggle. In contrast, the demonized *bania* – or *sahurkar*⁵ – is never really described as a major political presence. This changed in the wake of the Green Revolution of the 1950s and 1960s, and as processes of informalisation and urbanization have intensified, the political role of traders, merchants, transporters – what have been called the intermediate classes⁶ – has become increasingly pronounced.

They have been both a presence on the streets – most notoriously during the Pakistan National Alliance (PNA) agitations that brought down the Bhutto regime in 1977, and more generally at the forefront of all ‘Islam in danger’ campaigns – and at the polls, with the Pakistan Muslim League of Nawaz Sharif arguably the closest thing we have to a party that speaks for the urban petty bourgeoisie (alongside much more dominant classes). Indeed, it was Sharif and those of his ilk, namely the urban intermediate classes and those higher up the bourgeois food chain in Punjab, that Zia ul Haq patronized heavily, and which gave his regime a veneer of stability. The modus operandi was to give them political access to the state through local body elections, to complement their growing economic presence.

In my understanding what is crucial about this intermediate stratum is that it dialectically transcends all of the binaries that we often adopt in our conceptualization of capitalist modernity: state and market; the dominant and subordinate classes; informal and formal. So, for instance, it is from within the subordinate classes that the intermediate

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classes emerge, and they represent both the possibilities of upward mobility offered by urbanization and informalisation and the ruthlessness of a system that can just as quickly punish those who do not negotiate state and market well.

Looking at Pakistan through the intermediate classes is, for me, a way of understanding the dynamic class and social structure at large. Too much time is spent in Pakistan decrying feudalism, which, as more and more scholars have come to accept, detracts from understanding actually existing society and the structure of power more specifically. Capitalism has seeped into the nooks and crannies of everything, and with it culture, politics and economics have changed; it is just no longer accurate to depict Pakistan as a 'backward' society, dominated by the omnipotent British 'steel frame' in alliance with landed 'feudals' that expropriate surplus from a predominantly peasant mass.

Politics

So this brings me to the crux of my argument. The colonial-era structure of power in what was primarily a rural society was centred upon an insular and all-powerful civil bureaucracy distributing patronage through dominant classes with control over productive resources such as land and water. The social order has since been transformed. Yet I contend – counter-intuitive though it may seem – that the structure of power in today's Pakistan continues to feature patronage-based politics culminating in the state. Who distributes the patronage, towards what end, on what basis, and the nature of the state compared to its colonial predecessor – all of these facts can no longer just be assumed to be as they were. However, patronage is still the name of the game.

The way I want to try and explain this dialectic of change and continuity in historical terms – via the Gramscian dialectic of coercion and consent – is by taking us back to the heady days of the late 1960s and the radical political wave that swept both through Pakistan and much of the world. But let me first provide some details about the colonial-era political order that this wave of radicalism sought to demolish.

The British fashioned a property rights regime in which those who owned land – and other natural resources such

as forests – were empowered to act as patrons mediating between the property-less and the colonial state. The latter itself controlled substantial productive forces, most notably through its building of massive perennial irrigation networks in Punjab as well as upper Sindh.

This political economy of patronage was all-encompassing insofar as the state and landed class exercised decisive influence over most aspects of social life, including basic livelihoods, dispute resolution and social services. It was thus that the hallowed institutions of *thana* and *katcheri*⁷ came to acquire their everyday significance, while ‘traditional’ patrons who already exercised significant social power prior to the British conquest were further entrenched by the legalization of private property.

In a nutshell, the landed class was able to secure the long-term consent of the propertyless mass on account of a peculiarly colonial mix of economic and extra-economic coercion. The parochial identities that the colonial state happily institutionalized – particularly religion, caste and *biraderi*⁸ – became cast as perennial markers of native culture, and patrons invoked any number of these identities to retain control over their economic dependents.

There was of course great variation in many aspects of this social order across British India, particularly in the areas of the subcontinent that were later to constitute Pakistan. In the canal colonies of Punjab, for instance, the beneficiary of colonial paternalism was not the prototypical big landlord but a more modest individual peasant proprietor, whereas the exploited classes were distinguished by their hailing from what the state designated the ‘non-agricultural castes’. Outside of the agrarian heartland of the Indus Valley, property and authority forms were distinct, bringing into existence invented traditions such as tribal chieftains and *maliks*.⁹

The British had managed to insulate their patronage-based political order in the face of emergent contradictions but they never faced the magnitude of changes that their Pakistani successors had to contend with. By the middle of the 1960s, the patronage-based order that had prevailed through the colonial period was under attack as class, ethnicity, caste and just about everything else was politicized. In short, the

worldview of the subordinate class was transformed – in large part due to the efforts of the left – and the politics of negotiating *sarkar*, *zamindar* and *sahurkar*¹⁰ was now giving way to a politics where the state could be captured directly, to establish *Mazdoor Kissan Raj*.¹¹

In the event, this did not happen (depending on how revolutionary a project one understands the successful national liberation struggle in Bangladesh to have been – in any case west Pakistan was not the site of successful revolutionary upheaval). Further, Zia ul Haq and his coterie of generals then presided over the most counter-revolutionary period in the country's history. Pakistan was somewhat representative of the global trend inasmuch as the Zia regime initiated a process that David Harvey (2005) has called in the context of the imperialist countries, 'the restoration of class power'. But there was no prospect – and the generals were under no illusion about this – of simply turning back the clock and reviving the 'traditional' patronage regime. The Green Revolution, Gulf migrations and the process of urbanization more generally had transformed the predominantly rural social order and mandated the working out of new political configurations by the state and dominant classes.

Of course demobilizing the subordinate classes was the crucial imperative, and the Zia junta decided early that Islam was going to be the banner under which its whole political project would be undertaken. Important members of the ancien regime were easily convinced to be part of the new dispensation, inasmuch as they had become alienated by Bhutto's populism. Landlords (who never take much convincing to join government), industrialists stripped of their assets under the nationalization program, a demoralized civil bureaucracy – all were happy to become junior partners to the generals.

But, as I have hinted at above, the regime's most crucial initiative was to get the intermediate classes on board. Here I want to point out the symbiotic link between the intermediate classes and the religious right that came to prominence in this period. The religious right is far from just a cultural enforcer: it is a product of immense social and economic change, much of which is regional in scope. There

is a direct link between the political fortunes of the Islamist right and the political economy of drugs and guns — in short the whole paraphernalia of imperialist war in and around Afghanistan (Akhtar 2011).¹² It is no coincidence that traders and merchants are the face of ‘defence of Islam’ campaigns, or that religio-political organizations receive immense amounts of money from the intermediate classes (to complement the largesse of the Gulf kingdoms).

As such, therefore, the intermediate classes and the religious right were the emergent face of the patronage-based order instituted by the Zia regime. They were the new mediators between the subordinate classes and *thana/katcheri*. To be sure, they have not so much displaced the ‘traditional’ landed oligarchy as adapted the particular mode of politics that the latter championed throughout the colonial period and the first few decades after the country’s creation.

So, while what we once in the academy called ‘primordial’ identities are no longer determinants of political and social order as they once were, they continue to be instrumentalized, but now by a much more diverse set of patrons in a complex patronage chain featuring state functionaries and market racketeers.

What remains to be seen is how the worldview of the subordinate classes has evolved as this revived political economy of patronage has taken shape. Until now, one could be forgiven for interpreting this story in a way that the mass of working people appear to be passive participants. In fact, the rehabilitation of a waning structure of power during the Zia years was a direct response to the consciousness and political threat of the subordinate classes. More than three decades later a much more diverse ruling bloc continues to wonder if and when the working people for whom survival is the name of the game will stop acquiescing to the rules of this game. But why did they acquiesce? As we know, the Zia regime was the most brutal in Pakistan’s history. It demolished the left, and how far it went can be gauged by the fact that the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) was not spared under the pretext that it was an anti-establishment force. Political and cultural repression went together; women and religious communities cast outside the pale of ‘official Islam’ were almost completely

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banished from the public realm.

Having unleashed the coercive arm of the state upon a wide cross-section of society, the junta then proceeded to institutionalize a political order that was based on the generation of subordinate class consent through state functionaries, intermediate classes and the Zia regime's political subjectivity of choice, the religious right. I suggest that a wide cross-section of society has imbibed a Gramscian 'common sense' approach to politics, which is to suggest both a particular form of political practice – that is to seek out patrons as a means of navigating the rigours of state and market, formal and informal – and a cynical political imaginary to boot. Indeed, one of the crucial successes of the Zia and post-Zia regimes is that they have virtually evicted radical transformative imaginaries from the intellectual and political mainstream.

This is simply to say that there is no pretense that politics is anything more than getting things done, by hook or crook. In fact, the notion that politics can be about transforming everyday reality rather than simply trying to navigate it finds little traction in everyday discourse. This is not to suggest that ideological battles do not take place in what is a vast political field. One could argue that ethno-nationalists of various stripes do indeed put forward a transformative political imaginary, particularly Baloch freedom fighters. Some commentators also appear to argue that the militant right-wing represents a counter-hegemonic politics. I do not share this general perception, in large part because the right-wing in general – and most right-wing political forces very much operate in the mainstream – does not depart from 'common sense' as I have defined it here.

And this is where I will end. Not because there is no prospect of change in contemporary Pakistan, but because that is a subject for another time. Indeed, Gramscian common sense is never one-dimensional; it contains both passive elements that produce consent to the established order and active elements that encourage radical action to challenge it. It is the challenge facing left intellectuals and activists to rehabilitate a meaningful radical politics to rekindle the hopes of working people that the world can be changed, and that the people themselves can change it.

ENDNOTES

¹ Most famously, of course, Laclau and Mouffe (1985).

² I use both these terms in the tradition of scholars working in the Indian context. For “everyday” state, see Fuller and Harriss (2001); for “shadow” state, see Harriss-White (2003).

³ Literally, white master. Often used along with the term *kala sahib*, or brown master.

⁴ It is not possible for me to discuss here the fallouts of the “ideology of Pakistan” including state-sponsored jihadists turned renegades.

⁵ The English translation (of both terms) is moneylender.

⁶ The classic account is that of Kalecki (1969). See also Jha (1980) and, most recently, Harriss-White (2003).

⁷ *Thana*: police station; *katcheri*: local court.

⁸ Literally, patrilineal lineage.

⁹ A term used variously to refer to a village/tribal/clan head.

¹⁰ *Sarkar*: government; *zamindar*: landlord; *sahurkar*: moneylender.

¹¹ Literally, government of workers and peasants.

¹² Also in the 1980s, the military expanded its own corporate empire, suggesting yet another reason for the symbiotic relationship between the religious right and the state (cf Siddiq, 2007).

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This paper is based on a keynote address on 29 May 2014 at the conference **Pakistan Beyond Tremors and Terror: Critical Engagements with Political, Economic and Cultural Change**, 29-31 May 2014, York Centre for Asian Research, York University; University of Toronto; and Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada.

Please cite this paper as:

Akhtar, Aasim Sajjad (2016). "Failed State or Fragmented Hegemony: The Political Economy of Change in Pakistan". *Asia Colloquia Papers* 6(1). Toronto: York Centre for Asian Research. Available at: www.yorku.ca/ycar. ISBN: 978-1-5501-4642-4

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