

# Pakistan, an abundance of problems and scant knowledge

KRISTOFFEL LIETEN

In 1988, Benazir Bhutto published her *Daughter of the East, an Autobiography*, which she dedicated to her three children and to all the children of Pakistan. In 2006, Pervez Musharraf published *In the Line of Fire, A Memoir*, written in honour of his ailing mother and for the people of Pakistan. If not their policies, their books at least were dedicated to the entire spectrum of the people of Pakistan, (although their true purpose was an effort to explain themselves to the West). Bhutto's book was widely acclaimed since it heralded the dawn of progressive democracy under the leadership of a smart-looking and verbally superb young lady; Musharraf's book received little attention, possibly because it was written by a man who had been portrayed as an unfriendly and cunning military dictator, accused of being hand in glove not only with reactionary world powers but even with the Taliban.

## Scant scholarship

The actual history of Pakistan does not fully concur with the picture which both these leaders portray in their books and speeches. Unfortunately, however, little scholarship is available to provide us with a more realistic close reading of Pakistan. Or, as Stephen Cohen (2004) had warned: the US, in the midst of the war against terror in that region has "only a few true Pakistan experts and knows remarkably little about the country. Much of what has been written is palpably wrong, or at best superficial."

Scholarship within Pakistan, despite notable exceptions, also leaves much to be desired. One possible explanation for the omission is the undemocratic style of functioning of all governments in Pakistan, the civil-led administrations not less than the military governments led by Yahia Khan, Zia ul Haq and Musharraf.

Universities and research institutes have failed to function properly. Political interference and nepotism have competed in running down any academic quality that the institutions may have had in the distant past, as Aziz (1993) has superbly documented in the case of history writing. Whatever was left of the academic façade was torn down by politicisation and internecine struggles involving Muslim fundamentalists from the late 1980s onwards. Most Pakistani academicians who have withstood the political turbulence and the downgrading of the academic institutions have done so abroad.

Another explanation for the poor academic interest in Pakistan is that the country has been portrayed as a rogue state and is not high on the list of destinations for tourists or researchers. It is commonly perceived as the fount of Islamist terrorism and as a self-inclining reactionary bleakness, in sharp contrast with the attractive picture which, at least currently, is being drawn of its easterly neighbour. A study of US newspaper reporting on Pakistan (Moeller 2007) illustrates how the American press generally adopted the administration's monolithic framing of terrorism as well as "the demonizing of an entire population: in this case Pakistani Muslim men and boys".

## Haemorrhaged state formation

Pakistan was a sick state to start with. At independence in 1947, all institutions had to be created: "Pakistan was not a successor state. It was a seceding state. India was the successor state" (Feroz Ahmed, 1998). It did not have an ingrained nationality and the ideology that was chosen to cement that unity - Islam - was, in practice, much weaker than the forces of regional and linguistic disunity (Khan 1985; Rahman, 1997; Talbot 1999, Jaffrelot 2004, Cohen 2004).

The unity of Pakistan, and the functioning of its state institutions, depended on two institutional forces: bureaucracy and military, and leaning on the powerful landlord class. Traders and entrepreneurs, often having migrated from

British India, had to play second fiddle and share benefits with the bureaucracy. Economic power in Pakistan has remained very skewed. The nexus between the major landholding families, traders and entrepreneurs with the administration has kept the economy and the social structure under semi-feudal strains (White 1974; Omar 1990, Qadeer 2006, Hasan 2007).

## Issue-focused studies

Scholarship in Pakistan has occasionally focused on ethnography, for example Grima (2004) on north-western Pakistan, Verkaaik (2004) on the Muhajirs, and Lindholm (1996) on the Swat Pathans. But recent studies have tended to focus on the one and only issue with a global concern: Muslim extremism and terrorism.

Earlier, the reconstitution of the national ethos had the focus. The imposition of martial law in 1977 and the hanging of Zulfikar Bhutto by Zia ul Haq, for more than one reason was a "redefinition of a country", as Hassan Abbas

the venal abandon of Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, the seed of religious fanaticism sown more than two decades earlier had come to confront him as fully grown trees per-versely balanced by the empty coffers of the state" (Abbas 2005). That, in a nutshell, is the crisis which Pakistan is still confronted with in the post-Musharraf era.

## Coverage

More academic interest in Pakistan would likely contribute to more clarity on many of the issues at stake in a vulnerable nation with many problems and which is in the midst of a political cauldron. Pakistan, on the eastern proximity of Afghanistan, Iran and Iraq, is also just on the western fringe of mainstream Asia. For good reasons, therefore, the country has been taken up for special coverage in this issue of *IIAS Newsletter*. Five articles will cover political development, gender in the legal system, the aftermath of ethnic violence, the failing educational system and the life of Pakistan as migrants abroad.

## G.K. Lieten

Department of Anthropology, University of Amsterdam  
International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam  
g.c.m.lieten@uva.nl; kli@iisg.nl

## References

- Abbas, Hassan. 2005. *Pakistan's Drift into Extremism. Allah, the Army, and America's War on Terror*. London: Pentagon Press
- Ahmed, Feroz. 1998. *Ethnicity and Politics in Pakistan*. Karachi: Oxford University Press
- Aziz, KK. 1993. *The Pakistan Historian. Pride and Prejudice in the Writing of History*. Lahore: Vanguard
- Bhutto, Benazir. 1988. *Daughter of the East*. London: Hamish Hamilton
- Cohen, Stephen P. 2004. *The Idea of Pakistan*. New York: The Brookings Institute
- Grima, Benedicte. 2004. *Secrets from the Field: an Ethnographer's Notes from North Western Pakistan*. Bloomington: AuthorHouse
- Hasan, Parvez. 2007. "Role of the State in Pakistan's Economy". *Economic and Political Weekly*, 5 May 2007.
- Hussain, Zahid 2008. *Frontline Pakistan. The Struggle with Militant Islam*. Columbia: Columbia University Press
- Jaffrelot, Christophe. 2004. *A History of Pakistan and its Origins*. London: Anthem Press
- Khan, Mohammad Asghar. 1985. *Islam, Politics and the State: the Pakistan Experience*. London: Zed Books
- Lindholm Charles. 1996. *Frontier Perspectives. Essays in Comparative Anthropology*. Karachi: Oxford University Press
- Lau, Martin. 2006. *The Role of Islam in the Legal System of Pakistan*. Leiden: Brill
- Moeller, Susan D. 2007. *The "Good" Muslims: US Newspaper Coverage of Pakistan*, Maryland: ICMFA
- Musharraf, Pervez. 2006. *In the Line of Fire, A Memoir*. London: Simon and Schuster
- Noman, Omar. 1990. *Pakistan: a Political and Economic History since 1947*. London: Kegan Paul
- Qadeer, Mohammad. 2006. *Social and Cultural Transformations in a Muslim Nation*. London: Routledge
- Rahman, Tariq. 1997. *Language and Politics in Pakistan*. Karachi: OUP
- Schofield, Victoria. 2003. *Afghan Frontier. Feuding and Fighting in Central Asia*. London: I.B.Tauris
- Talbot, Ian 1999. *Pakistan, a Modern History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Verkaaik, Oscar. 2004. *Migrants and Militants: Fun and Urban Violence in Pakistan*. Princeton: Princeton University Press
- White, Lawrence. 1974. *Industrial Concentration and Economic Power in Pakistan*. New Jersey: Princeton



photograph courtesy of gul 791 www.sxc.hu

(2005) argues. The state, particularly its army and secret service, were ideologically reformed. The new ideology broke with secularism and imposed one specific reading of Islam, the puritanical Wahhabism as practiced in Saudi Arabia. The new religious ideology was in contradiction with the Sufist tradition and disunited the country more than ever before: "the greatest tension of all was between the state's legalistic imposition of Islam and the humanist traditions of Sufism" (Talbot 1999; Khan 1985; Schofield 2003; see also Lau 2006 and Lau and Imran Ali in this issue).

This new Pakistan, as a frontline state, played a vital role in the struggle against Soviet communism. It heralded a period of instability which lasted until Musharraf came to power in October 1999 and was confronted with a ruination of the state: "through the active fostering by Zia ul-Haq, the funding of Saudi Arabia, espousal by the US, and