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Richard Matthew on Pakistan's Drift into Extremism: Allah, the Army, and America's War on Terror by Hassan Abbas. London: M. E. Sharpe, 2005. 276 pp.

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Abstract

A review of:

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Human rights, Pakistan, Military, Politics, History

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Pakistan's Drift into Extremism: Allah, the Army, and America's War on Terror by Hassan Abbas. London: M. E. Sharpe, 2005. 276 pp.

Pakistan's president, General Pervez Musharraf, has been the subject of considerable media attention lately. To the extent that there is a consensus in the press, it is that Musharraf's troubles are in large measure an outcome of the failed processes and bad decisions that have characterized his eight years in office. The increasingly emphatic assertions that Musharraf is the author of his own undoing, and that, as usual, the country will pay the price for its leader's misdeeds, will be familiar to all observers of Pakistani politics. Musharraf's predecessors have all elicited similar criticisms.

Why are Pakistan's leaders inevitably undone by political crisis, ending their terms amidst accusations of corruption and incompetence? Hassan Abbas has authored a highly readable insider's guide to Pakistan's turbulent political scene that sheds much light on this question. In the Preface, he writes, "This is a story of Pakistan. The three main characters are the Pakistani Army, the jihadi actors, and the United States of America...It is my candid and straightforward analysis of what went wrong with Pakistan." (xv) What emerges is a vision of a country in which governing and state-building are thankless, Sisyphean tasks.

The book is organized into 11 chronological chapters. It begins with a brief overview of the period prior to independence, noting that the British colonial system did much to divide the subcontinent, fostering "backwardness" among the Muslim population while creating opportunities for advancement for tractable Hindus (8). In Chapter 2, "The Early Years," Abbas describes Pakistan's turbulent beginnings, formed of two parts divided by a somewhat hostile India, its attraction to the democratic regimes of the UK and the U.S. rather than Soviet communism, and the speed with which it was drawn into the Cold War calculations by American security specialists worried about the influence of Pakistani communists.

During the "Ayub Era" of the 1950s and 1960s (Chapter 3), Pakistan struggled to improve the quality of its military, "in a lamentable state" after partition, while the situation in Kashmir deteriorated (32). Abbas offers a fascinating account of the thinking that culminated in the disastrous war against India in 1965. Apparently, Pakistan's leaders hoped that a violent skirmish would trigger international arbitration of the Kashmir conflict. Instead, a politically motivated "change of command at a critical time" resulted in a failed mission and political disaster (49). Protests and discontent soon placed the government in jeopardy, and it was replaced by military coup in 1969.

Military rule proved yet another disaster as General Yahya sought to manage rising nationalism in East Pakistan. Long neglected by its western sibling, the Awami League, under Sheikh Mujib, had issued a set of demands in 1966 known as the Six Points, to promote parity between the two parts of the country. At first, Yahya was favorably disposed to accommodating these demands, but before a settlement was reached, the Pakistani Army initiated Operation Searchlight to blunt dissent in the East. This "inflicted on East Pakistan a reign of horror...[and] brought upon Pakistan eternal shame" (63). Raping, looting and torching hardened Mujib, Indian forces entered the fray, and the Pakistani Army conceded defeat on December 16, 1971. General Yahya was arrested, and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto became president four days later.

Bhutto hung on for six years, working to diminish the political influence of the army and playing a complicated game of trying to use religious extremists to his advantage (e.g., to destabilize the Daud regime in Afghanistan) while blunting their political ambitions. By the mid 1970s, religious protests led to a declaration of martial law and grave concern in the U.S., which may have had a hand in his ouster (88).

General Zia Ul-Haq seized power in July 1977 and spent the next decade protecting Pakistan's nuclear weapons program (a response to India's), while trying to work Cold War dynamics in Pakistan's favor. Abbas devotes a long chapter (6) to this "most remarkable man," whose extraordinary achievements were undermined by domestic policies that "did great long-term damage to the interests of his country (132)." Zia died in a plane crash in August of 1988, opening the door to another experiment with democracy. Abbas worked under the regime of Benazir Bhutto (1994-96) and his discussion of the enormous challenges both she and Nawaz Sharif, who succeeded her as prime minister, faced as they tried to negotiate the complex political space defined by religious extremists, the military and American interests is fascinating.

The book ends with four brief chapters on the turbulent Musharraf era. Like his predecessors, Musharraf has faced an almost impossible task, complicated by the global impacts of the 9/11 attacks on the U.S. If his government cooperates with India or the United States, radical extremists domestically mobilize violent protests. If the grievances and concerns of the religious conservatives are addressed, then the U.S. takes punitive measures. If the concerns of the elites are allowed to shape policy, the poor become angry and frustrated. But, if policies are designed to help the poor, threatened elites act to undermine them. If the president decides to pull forces back from Kashmir or tighten surveillance along the border with Afghanistan, then his resolve is sorely tested as acts of violence ramp up in Islamabad and Karachi. If he introduces education for girls in the north, a severe conservative backlash follows. Burn poppy fields and desperately poor people migrate into urban areas where they are vulnerable to being drawn into criminal gangs or terrorist organizations. It is no wonder that Musharraf may soon be replaced.

Abbas's writing is rich with anecdotes and strong opinions. This is the work of a consummate insider—a man who worked at a senior level in the administrations of both Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto and President Musharraf. The book is more reminiscent of a William Langewiesche, a Robert Kaplan or a Seymour Hersh, than a dispassionate ivory tower academic. The writing is less powerful than that of our best political journalists, but Abbas shares their eye for detail and their ease in shifting from revealing anecdote to general theoretical claim to personal observation and opinion without losing the thread of narrative. The end result is not especially objective, but it is an informed, entertaining and important window into a country that, for better or worse, plays a major role in world affairs. It will be of great interest to anyone who wishes to understand this region of the world.

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