

EXPLORING THE POLITICAL IN SOUTH ASIA

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Politics, Landlords and Islam in Pakistan

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POLITICS,
LANDLORDS AND
ISLAM IN PAKISTAN

Nicolas Martin

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
NEW DELHI LONDON NEW YORK

First published 2016
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record has been requested for this book

ISBN: 978-1-138-82188-0 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-68437-6 (ebk)

Typeset in Goudy
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

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FOREWORD

When we set up the series 'Exploring the Political in South Asia', we had intended that we would be able to include within it rich studies of the political in all the countries of the Indian subcontinent, not just India on which the literature is without doubt the richest. It is therefore a particular pleasure to write the foreword to this volume as it is the first book on Pakistan that we are publishing in this series. I am delighted to note that Nicolas Martin has delivered a book that is unique and in keeping with the tradition of rigorous and insightful political ethnography that this series attempts to showcase. Martin presents an analysis of contemporary Pakistan on the basis of evidence gathered during a period of two years during which he lived in rural Punjab – sometimes in a Sufi shrine, sometimes in humble rural homes, made friends with locals from across classes, worked in the local languages and got to know their public and private lives with an intimacy only anthropologists dare to achieve. This book therefore adds a totally new perspective and insight into Pakistan, a country that is much written about by writers who gain but a fleeting familiarity with people and places and usually from a distance. Martin's account adds to this corpus with a scholarly and evidence-based account of the Pakistani state, electoral politics and clientelism – written with a nose firmly on the ground.

This book tackles the most knotty issue that lies at the heart of politics in the populous province of Punjab – that of patronage. Almost any account of Pakistani politics and its chequered record of democracy has drawn attention to the importance of political patronage in the creation of vote blocs that are mobilised for elections. These accounts have drawn attention to the entrenched nature of the power of rural elites who keep an impoverished rural workforce under their thumb by mediating between the state's resources and the intended recipients. Such clientelistic relationships are then mobilised for votes during the election season as clients are forced to support their patrons' political loyalties to ensure their own survival. Scholars in their attempt to interpret such a situation empathetically have

sometimes argued that exploitative as it might seem from the outside, such a system of patronage has its advantages as it alleviates poverty by at least making sure that state resources are allocated somewhere and in doing so possibly also stem the possibility of widespread protest movements among the rural poor.

Martin categorically rejects such a reading of rural Pakistan. His book makes it clear that patronage is nothing but 'locally embedded despotism'. He shows how landlords continue to use debt bondage as a way of controlling their clients and the other ways in which elites continuously exploit institutional, religious and social mechanisms to reproduce their power. He shows how the combination of feudal patronage and electoral democracy undermines other social mechanisms of creating social solidarity through political parties representing sectoral interests. As a result all alliances are forced to become nakedly instrumental and transactional in the zero sum game of political power. The result is everyday violence and vendetta that in turn create a state of vulnerability and fear among the poor. In the long run, this kind of politics, therefore, undermines the everyday power of the state by stemming the effectiveness of public sector services and benefits that the state is able to provide, by capturing resources for personal gain. Martin conducted this study while a military regime was in power under President Musharraf. Many Pakistanis had hoped that the strong leadership at the centre would make such local factional politics irrelevant as a military government would undercut corrupt political structures to reach the people directly. But unfortunately, even military regimes need to create a legitimacy for their existence, and Martin notes, 'military regimes used devolution programmes to create a loyal class of politicians'.

Unsurprisingly, the ordinary members of the chronically poor, rural agricultural workforce struggle to provide a robust challenge to such blatant corruption of the political establishment. The workforce is already divided by caste membership, and rising Islamism diverted attention from issues of inequality and social justice. Further, Martin points out, military meddling made rural politics more parochial and kinship based than ever before and brought personal enmities to the fore. As a result, instead of providing a radical critique of an exploitative system of extraction and abuse, and the system that causes their own structural subordination, ordinary people came up with only moral critiques of individual elites and their behaviour, judging one against the other.

But Nicolas Martin is able to end on a more upbeat note by bringing his analyses up to the present. He does this by evaluating the implications of the recent run of democratic governments that Pakistan has seen, first with the full term of the Pakistan People's Party government and then the relatively peaceful electoral change that brought their old rivals, the

FOREWORD

Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz) back into power. The PPP government during its tenure under Zardari's leadership was able to bring in legislative changes that affected all three arms of power of a democratic government: it strengthened executive governance from political interference; it limited the ability of the military leadership to destabilise elected governments; and it reduced the executive's role in appointing members of the judiciary. Crucially, the changes also made Pakistan's Electoral Commission more accountable in its conduct by making its processes more transparent and subject to scrutiny. All of these measures could potentially have a far-reaching impact on Pakistani politics. With growing urbanisation and cleaner governance, we can only hope that Pakistan's despotic demagogic rural landlords will soon be consigned to history.

Mukulika Banerjee

London

July 2014

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first of all like to thank the European Research Council and the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ERC-2011-StG – N° 284080—AISMA and the UK Economic and Social Research Council) for funding me during the year 2012–13 writing this book. I would additionally like to thank a number of people for their generous support in both Pakistan and the UK. I am particularly indebted to my supervisors, Professor Parry and Professor Mundy, for their patient guidance and careful reading of my work. Their questions and suggestions always pointed me in more productive directions. Dr Stafford, a supervisor through my initial months as a PhD candidate, provided me with equally helpful advice. I would also like to thank Professor Deborah James, Dr Alpa Shah, Dr Amita Bavisakar, Dr Mukulika Banerjee, Dr Jens Lerche, Dr Magnus Marsden, Dr Lucia Michelutti, Dr Tom Bolyston, Dr Anastasia Piliavski, Dr Maxim Bolt, and Dr Andrew Sanchez for reading and commenting on different chapters in this book. Likewise the comments of the anonymous reviewer at Routledge helped me clarify certain arguments. Finally I would like to thank Professors Jan Breman and Stuart Corbridge for their suggestions on how to turn my thesis into this book.

I would also like to thank the people who commented on papers I presented at different seminars in UK universities, as well as the various anonymous reviewers who read and gave feedback on papers I sent out for publication. More informally, my discussions on Pakistani politics with Dr Hassan Javid from the LSE were particularly enlightening.

Dr Anwar Iqbal and Professor Hafeez-ur Rahman at Quaid-I Azam University in Islamabad were most kind in supporting my affiliation and in offering me their hospitality, guidance and help during my stay in Pakistan. Dr Anwar Iqbal in particular went far beyond the call of duty by spending several days in government departments trying to get my research visa approved.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All of my fellow students in the LSE Department of Anthropology and elsewhere were very supportive, and I benefited from the frequent exchange of ideas about our research topics and everything else. I am particularly indebted to Roland de Wilde who remained in contact with me throughout fieldwork and who subsequently read drafts of several of my chapters. Among others I would also like to thank Carrie Heitmeyer, Amit Desai, Mette High, Vicky Boydell, Giovanni Bocchi, and Pradeep Shinde for discussing my work with me. Last but not least I am deeply indebted to Jonathan Grossman for long hours spent meticulously reading my thesis and giving me extensive editorial comments.

For offering me his hospitality and friendship while I was in Islamabad I am grateful to Anibal Oprandi from Plan International. He always made me feel welcome at his house, and his enthusiastic support for my research project encouraged me to persevere. I am also grateful to Rodolfo and Susana Martin-Saravia for their wonderful hospitality in Islamabad. I would also like to thank Khaled Khan from Charsadda who introduced me to people from all walks of life in Islamabad and who helped me overcome significant bureaucratic hurdles. To Abdul Aziz Abassi I am indebted for having ignited my interest in Pakistan.

In Bek Sagraña – the pseudonym used to refer to my village fieldsite – I am indebted to a large number of people who would prefer to remain unnamed. They were generous and hospitable and willing to discuss my research with me. Without their friendship and support during difficult times it would have been impossible for me to complete this book.

Finally I would like to thank my wife Emily for her affectionate support and encouragement and for tolerating my obsessive focus on all things related to Pakistan during the past several years.

NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

The first instance of all Urdu and Punjabi words is italicised, and thereafter italics are dropped. For the sake of simplicity, the plural of Urdu and Punjabi words is denoted by the addition of an 's'. English translations have been used where they were deemed adequate to convey the meaning of the original.

The exchange rate at the time of fieldwork was roughly Rs100 for £1. The name of the village, the names of villagers and the name of the dominant caste within it have all been changed in order to protect the identity of informants.

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INTRODUCTION

In his collection of short stories entitled *In Other Rooms, Other Wonders*, Daniyal Mueenuddin describes a feudal world reminiscent of that described by 19th-century Russian novelists that inspire his work. It is a world inhabited by absentee landlords with vast estates in the Southern Punjab, large retinues of servants, peasants, cattle rustlers, criminals, peasant girl mistresses and unscrupulous farm managers, bureaucrats, and politicians. Like their counterparts in 19th-century Russia, these cosmopolitan Punjabi feudal lords admire the cultural achievements of Europe where they spend their summers. Their mansions in Lahore are staffed with valets, butlers, drivers, cooks, and maids, all brought from the villages on their estates. Here parties are hosted where high-ranking military officers, politicians, businessmen, and civil servants gather and drink smuggled Black Label Scotch whisky. Their children study in prestigious universities in the United Kingdom and, increasingly, the United States.

However, the world that Mueenuddin describes is changing. Members of this landed aristocracy are no longer necessarily the wealthiest or the most politically influential people in the country. The wealthiest aristocratic (*ashrafi*)¹ landlords through whom the British once used to rule the Punjab, and who remained politically prominent after independence, have been gradually overtaken both politically and economically by prosperous Jat farmers as well as by businessmen. In rural Pakistan, the landlord class continues to wield disproportionate power, but there have been some power shifts within it. As Mueenuddin's short stories and this work document, those anglicised aristocratic feudal lords who fail to invest in agricultural modernisation, and who shy away from the feuds and from the violence of

¹ The term *ashrafi* in South Asia generally refers to people of noble descent. Amongst the Muslims the ashrafi landlords were predominantly those claiming Arabian and Central Asian descent.

rural Punjabi politics, are overtaken politically and economically by traditionally less wealthy and influential members of the landed classes. The aristocrats claim that the country is now run by corrupt and uneducated upstarts who flaunt their wealth through lavish weddings and garishly decorated mansions.

In Mueenuddin's short stories the decline of the aristocratic order is illustrated through the case of the absentee landlord K.K. Harouni. Harouni, who lives in a large air-conditioned mansion in Lahore and who only occasionally visits his vast estate, is oblivious to the fact that he is being swindled by the manager, a local landlord, to whom he has delegated the estate's management. When K.K. Harouni needs money to invest in unsuccessful business ventures – in order to keep up with upstart industrialists and to plug holes into the leaky finances of his Lahore mansion – he trustingly gives his manager Jaglani powers of attorney to sell some of his land. Since Harouni doesn't even know the value of his lands, Jaglani buys the plots himself at prices far below market value and soon owns several hundred acres. Jaglani runs the estate with an iron fist, more for his own benefit than for his master's. To villagers Harouni is a distant figure, and they exploit his careless attitude towards his finances by stealing from him whenever they can. While Harouni leads a cosmopolitan lifestyle in Lahore and abroad, it is Jaglani who deals with the grittier aspects of life on the estate and in the surrounding area. He supervises labourers, deals with village disputes and works with local toughs to achieve control over the area's inhabitants. Eventually Jaglani's local influence allows him to become a provincial minister. Although Mueenuddin does not say so, political office probably allows him to further consolidate his landholdings through the multiple opportunities for enrichment it offers. The present work is interested in landlords that resemble Jaglani more closely than they do K.K. Harouni.

Anatol Lieven writes: 'I thought of arguing that there is no such thing as a feudal in Pakistan; but then I remembered wild-boar hunting with the noble landowners of Sindh – a remarkably feudal experience' (Lieven 2011: 17). I too witnessed tent-pegging and hunting events that had a feudal feel to them. At the Lahore horse and cattle show in 2004, landlords wearing starched white shalwar kameezs displayed their martial prowess on frisky stallions. Between events they lounged on charpais surrounded by servants attending to their every need. In the evenings they watched banded horses dancing, and later on in the night they watched dancing girls in Lahore's red light district or in more exclusive private settings. One evening a landlord boasted that he could spend the night with any girl in his home village that caught his fancy, regardless of their husband or father's objections. I later learnt that this was no idle boast.

This event at the start of my fieldwork and my initial forays into the Punjabi countryside – where I soon became aware of the arbitrary despotism of landlords and of the widespread practice of debt-bondage – seemed to confirm the feudal hypothesis. The landlords I saw appeared to be diverting much of their surplus into non-productive investments in maintaining local power, ranging from consumption loans to collective social rituals to the hire of armed thugs (*goondas*). Moreover they spent most of their time socialising with other landlords rather than managing their farms to maximise agricultural productivity. The impression that they were using both their capital and their time unproductively was reinforced by academic and policy literature according to which semi-feudal power structures in South Asian villages simultaneously exploit the poor and depress economic growth potential (cf. Harris 1980).

Particularly during the two decades after independence, the policy literature in South Asia advocated land reforms on the basis that large farms were inefficient because they were less labour intensive than smaller ones. However somewhat later literature (Alavi 1973, Khan and Maki 1975, Herring 1983) indicated that as modern technology and production relations penetrated South Asian agriculture, smaller farms without access to improved capital works, technical information and inexpensive credit lost their traditional yield advantage. According to Herring (1983), local elites invested in supra-local politics in order to get access to these and to bolster labour repressive social organisations of production which traditional patron–client ties no longer sustained. In his view large farmers in Pakistan were capitalists, and this was entirely compatible with labour repressive practices such as debt-bondage. While Ashok Rudra (1980) viewed landlords' investment in maintaining local power – through consumption loans, collective social rituals and the hire of *goondas* – as non-productive, Herring argued that these could be considered as functional requisites for the reproduction of labour comparable to expenditure on antitrust lawyers, industrial spies, plant security guards, public relations personnel, and corporate philanthropy under industrial capitalism.

When I started fieldwork the discussion that followed from the comment of a powerful landlord and hereditary saint (*pir*) seemed to indicate that landlords – like Mueenuddin's Jaglani – could no longer take their power for granted in the face of both capitalist development and electoral politics.

The *pir* came from the Punjabi district of Jhang and turned up at our tent at the Horse and Cattle Show near the stables of Lahore's Forter Stadium accompanied by four servants, one of which was carrying a hooded hawk on a gloved hand. He sat on a charpai and, between puffs on an ornate brass hukka with a revolving base, embarked on a monologue lamenting the

growing political and economic clout of upstart businessmen. He claimed that a wealthy industrialist had expressed envy because he had so many servants; according to him this showed how money could never buy the social influence that he enjoyed as a landlord. However his comment that the introduction of schools decreased the labour force at his disposal – by creating unrealistic ambitions among workers – hinted at the fact that he could no longer take this social influence for granted. As soon as he left, one of the assembled landlords turned to me with a mischievous look and asked me what I thought about Pakistan’s feudal culture, at which the other landlords burst into laughter. One of them went on to tell me that the *pir* was anachronistic and trying to revive past glories and that in modern day Pakistan you needed to get involved in both politics and business if you wanted to retain your social influence and status. He said that modern landlords needed to make money by investing in their farms, into businesses, into education, and into politics.

The principal focus of this book is on how in contemporary Pakistan control over the state apparatus is central to landlords’ strategies of accumulation and domination. In it, I show how members of a numerically strong patrilineal clan (*biraderi*)² of prosperous Jats consolidated their political and economic power thanks to their cohesion and to their forceful involvement in local politics and in frequently criminal business ventures. In this book, as in other works I have published, I have changed my informants’ names to protect their identities. I have also changed the name of their subcaste to Gondal for the same reason.³ Like Jaglani in Mueenuddin’s short story, these Gondal Jats overtook members of an aristocratic lineage of landlords, often more concerned with polo and hare-coursing than politics and business, as the political overlords of a region of the Sargodha District.

Here it should be noted that while the image of a decaying aristocracy is a powerful one, it doesn’t fully portray reality. Unlike the Jaglanis and the Gondals of this world, the K.K. Harounis and Makhdooms could afford to move out of the local political scene. Having degrees from prestigious

² In the Pakistani Punjab the terms ‘biraderi’ and ‘qaum’ are often used interchangeably to refer to the patrilineal clan although the latter is more frequently used for more inclusive forms of identity such as ethnicity (e.g. Pathan, Baluch, Punjabi) or nationality (Pakistani, Indian, etc.). The term caste (*zat*) is not very frequently used. See especially Chaudhary (1999: 11).

³ Needless to say the events and characters in this book have nothing to do with members of the actual Gondal subcaste. I have chosen the name Gondal merely because it is large sub-caste of Jats in district Sargodha and is of roughly equivalent rank to that of my informants.

universities in Pakistan and abroad – mainly in the United Kingdom and the United States – they could pursue lucrative careers in banks and multinational corporations and therefore avoid the cut-throat world of contemporary Pakistani politics. Others from this class obtained high ranking posts in the bureaucracy and then frequently moved into international organisations such as the United Nations, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. Those with the most foresight invested in industry, building sugar mills and food processing plants. Although by no means all aristocratic landlords in Pakistan opted out of rural politics, anecdotal evidence suggests that many followed a similar path to the Makhdoods. In the area of Bek Sagrama, the fictional name I have given to my village, the effect of their exit was to open the door to the forceful and numerous members of the Gondal clan.

The case of Chowdri Sahib – as I shall call him here – the heir of a powerful aristocratic family in Sargodha district nicely illustrates why aristocratic landlords withdrew from local politics, as well as what happened to their constituencies when they did. Chowdri Sahib became a member of the provincial assembly in his early thirties. His family's vast estate and agro-industries employing tens of thousands of people gave him a virtually guaranteed seat in the national assembly regardless of his age and lack of experience. Brought up in Lahore, and later at boarding schools abroad, he hadn't found rural Punjabi politics to his taste and decided that there was no need for him to remain involved. He complained about how his constituents had incessantly assailed him with requests to remove uncooperative police officers and local land registration officers (*patwaris*) in order to pursue some land grab (*qabza*) or other illicit scheme. Several landlords apparently asked him to get their servants government jobs so that the state would pay their wages while they continued to work for them. People also frequently approached him to arrange release from jail for relatives guilty of some crime or other.

After abandoning politics Chowdri Sahib spent less time in the village and his absence created a power vacuum that allowed four forceful brothers – medium-sized landholders – to start harassing people and grabbing their land. Responding to the complaints of villagers, Chowdri Sahib eventually took the four siblings to court. The brothers responded with threats of violence, and Chowdri Sahib and his family had to start traveling to the village with armed guards. This situation lasted for four years, during which time several people were killed and injured in gun battles. The eldest of the four brothers was himself killed by Chowdri Sahib's gunmen after he attacked them when they were driving through the village.

The remaining three siblings later launched a second attack on Chowdri Sahib's gunmen when these were drinking tea at a roadside stall and