

Review Essay

Can Pakistan Work?

A Country in Search of Itself

Pervez Hoodbhoy

The Idea of Pakistan. BY STEPHEN PHILIP COHEN. Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2004, 367 pp. \$32.95.

When he founded Pakistan in 1947, Muhammad Ali Jinnah—an impeccably dressed Westernized Muslim with Victorian manners and a secular outlook—promised the subcontinent’s Muslims that they would finally be able to fulfill their cultural and civilizational destiny. Although the new nation arose from a bloodbath of ethnic cleansing and sectarian violence, and its fundamental premise was that Hindus and Muslims could never live together, its early years nevertheless held some promise of a liberal, relatively secular polity. But with time, Jinnah’s Pakistan has grown weaker, more authoritarian, and increasingly theocratic. Now set to become the world’s fourth most populous nation, it is all of several things: a client

state of the United States yet deeply resentful of it; a breeding ground for jihad and al Qaeda as well as a key U.S. ally in the fight against international terrorism; an economy and society run for the benefit of Pakistan’s warrior class, yet with a relatively free and feisty press; a country where education and science refuse to flourish but which is nevertheless a declared nuclear power; and an inward-looking society that is manifestly intolerant of minorities but that has never seen anything like the state-organized pogroms of India, Afghanistan, Iran, or China.

In *The Idea of Pakistan*, Stephen Philip Cohen sets out to understand this enigma of modern history. Cohen is the United States’ leading analyst of South Asia, and this authoritative work of broad scope and meticulous research will surely become required reading on Pakistan. It also provides a view from the heart of the American

PERVEZ HOODBHOY is a nuclear physicist at Quaid-e-Azam University in Islamabad.



PETER MARLOW/MAGNUM PHOTOS

An effigy of Pervez Musharraf at a protest in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, September 2001

empire, an analysis of how Washington can best advance its interests in South Asia. Cohen's facts are indisputable, his logic cold and clear, and his omissions deliberate and meaningful.

Ominous declarations of imminent chaos in Pakistan abound in the United States. Cohen aims both to raise warnings and to soothe fears. Although he acknowledges that profound problems plague both the idea and the reality of Pakistan, he distances himself from apocalyptic "failed state" scenarios. Catastrophic failure of

this nuclear-armed state is surely a possibility. But Pakistan's fate will ultimately depend on whether its leaders can find an answer to the fundamental question that has plagued their fellow citizens for more than half a century: "How can we make the idea of Pakistan actually work?"

AN ARMY WITH A COUNTRY

According to a popular but rather humorless Pakistani joke, "all countries have armies, but here, an army has a country." Indeed, even when civilian governments

have nominally been in charge in Pakistan, there has never been much doubt about who actually makes decisions there. In addition to holding political power, the Pakistani army controls vast commercial and industrial interests and owns massive rural and urban properties. As Cohen remarks, “regardless of what may be desirable, the army will continue to set the limits on what is possible in Pakistan.”

General Pervez Musharraf, the country’s current chief executive, seized power in a bloodless coup in 1999, and there have since been several attempts on his life. After each, the media has warned of a nuclear state careening out of control, with radical Islamists fighting to get into the driver’s seat. Cohen rightly dismisses this view as alarmist. If the general were killed, the army establishment would quickly replace Musharraf with another senior officer, and various measures—the installation of former Citibank executive Shaukat Aziz as prime minister, most notably—have recently been undertaken to protect against a leadership crisis. Cohen also breaks with Musharraf’s staunchest international backers, who “see him as a wise and modern leader, a secular man who is not afraid to support the West or to offer peace to India, and a man who can hold back the onrush of demagogues and Islamic extremists.” Cohen notes that “no serious Pakistani analyst sees Musharraf in these terms. ... If he resembles any past Pakistani leader, it is General Yahya Khan—also a well-intentioned general who did the United States a great favor.”

The question of why the warrior class was never tamed by civilian rule points back to the founding of the Pakistani state. As the respected Pakistani scholar

Eqbal Ahmad has emphasized, the civilian system of power was never regarded by Pakistan’s citizens as just, appropriate, or authoritative. And despite Jinnah’s declarations, the idea of Pakistan was unclear from the start. Lacking any clear basis for legitimacy or direction, the state quickly aligned with the powerful landed class: the army leadership and the economic elite joined forces to claim authority in a nation without definition or cohesion. In subsequent years, the government maintained the feudal structure of society and entered into a manifestly exploitative relationship with Pakistan’s poor eastern wing (which became Bangladesh in 1971 after a short but bloody war). Even now, bonded labor is common, and many peasants live in conditions close to slavery. Politicians, with the exception of the mercurial demagogue Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, have made no attempt at reform, ignoring the hearts and minds of the masses in favor of cultivating elite favor and pursuing quick financial gain.

The result has been ideological confusion, civilian helplessness, and an environment eminently hospitable to putsches. Indeed, no elected government has completed its term in Pakistan’s 57-year history. Pakistani generals express contempt for the civilian order and steadfastly hold that “what is good for the army is good for Pakistan,” and Pakistani society is thoroughly militarized. Bumper stickers read, “The Finest Men Join the Pakistan Army”; tanks parade on the streets of Islamabad while jet aircraft screech overhead; discarded naval guns, artillery pieces, and fighter aircraft adorn public plazas. It is even a criminal offense to “criticize the armed forces of Pakistan or to bring them into disaffection.”

Can Pakistan Work?

The military is only one (albeit the most important) component of the wider “establishment” that runs Pakistan. Cohen calls this establishment a “moderate oligarchy” and defines it as “an informal political system that [ties] together the senior ranks of the military, the civil service, key members of the judiciary, and other elites.” Membership in this oligarchy, Cohen contends, requires adherence to a common set of beliefs: that India must be countered at every turn; that nuclear weapons have endowed Pakistan with security and status; that the fight for Kashmir is unfinished business from the time of partition; that large-scale social reforms such as land redistribution are unacceptable; that the uneducated and illiterate masses deserve only contempt; that vociferous Muslim nationalism is desirable but true Islamism is not; and that Washington is to be despised but fully taken advantage of. Underlying these “core principles,” one might add, is a willingness to serve power at any cost.

BLOWBACK

Pakistan was put under U.S. sanctions after its nuclear tests in May 1998 and is now frequently referred to as a nuclear proliferator motivated by radical Islamist visions. But, as Cohen points out, Pakistan’s nuclear dreams probably began 40 years ago when—under the aegis of the Central Treaty Organization—the U.S. Army initiated large-scale training of Iranian, Turkish, and Pakistani officers in armor, artillery, and other technical services. Hundreds of Pakistani officers attended U.S. schools between 1955 and 1958. “There was an important American contribution in the form of periodic visits by American nuclear experts to the

Staff College in Quetta,” says Cohen. During a visit to the Staff College, he noted that the school’s official history refers to “a 1957 visit by a U.S. nuclear-warfare team that ‘proved most useful and resulted in modification and revision of the old syllabus’ to bring it into line with the ‘fresh data’ given by the team.” In Cohen’s opinion, “present-day Pakistani nuclear planning and doctrine is descended directly from this early exposure to Western nuclear strategizing; it very much resembles American thinking of the mid-1950s with its acceptance of first-use and the tactical use of nuclear weapons against onrushing conventional forces.”

Cohen brings this new, and quite surprising, insight to U.S.-Pakistan nuclear history, but one might have expected a more detailed examination of this critical area, rather than a few quick comments. It is, in fact, a subject worthy of another book from him.

Pakistan’s nuclear program began in earnest after India tested a “peaceful nuclear device” in 1974. Washington initially succeeded in thwarting Pakistan’s nuclear ambitions, persuading France not to sell Pakistan a reprocessing plant. But Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan, a metallurgist employed by a European consortium that enriched uranium for nuclear power, forged ahead, surreptitiously acquiring classified information and materials and passing them to Bhutto’s government. Using reverse engineering, Pakistan successfully built and began operating a uranium enrichment facility. By the time Bhutto was overthrown and hanged by his successor, General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, the nuclear program was in full swing.

The U.S. response has been a series of flips and flops, largely determined by

immediate political needs rather than long-term strategic thinking. President Jimmy Carter imposed sanctions on Islamabad but waived them following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. A series of presidential waivers allowed U.S. economic and military assistance to continue flowing through 1990, as a reward for Pakistan's anti-Soviet efforts in Afghanistan. This was despite the fact that Pakistan disclosed in 1984 that it could enrich uranium for nuclear weapons and in 1987 that it could assemble a nuclear device. Even as the president of the United States solemnly informed Congress that Pakistan was not seeking to make nuclear weapons, anyone in Islamabad or Rawalpindi could hail a taxicab and ask to be taken to what was (and is) known as the "bomb factory." Following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, Washington toughened its stance on Pakistan's nuclear program and, after the 1998 nuclear tests (which were in response to similar moves by India), imposed harsh new sanctions. But soon after September 11, 2001—when Islamabad regained the strategic significance it had lost at the end of the Cold War—Washington dropped all nuclear-related sanctions, in part as a reward for Musharraf's decision to join the U.S.-led coalition against the Taliban.

Throughout this period, it was never a secret that Pakistan was and continues to be host to an array of radical Islamist groups. These pathological social and religious formations have a variety of aims—some target the American empire, whereas others focus on the more limited goal of "liberating" Kashmir or eliminating religious rivals—but all trace their origins to the U.S.-backed Afghan jihad, which over the course of a decade profoundly

affected Pakistani society, culture, and politics and unleashed developments that would have dire consequences down the road. "During the first Afghan war, the [Inter-Services Intelligence agency's] strategy was to support hard-line Islamic groups, and with American concurrence, the ISI characterized the war against the Soviet intruders as a religious struggle against atheistic communism," Cohen writes. "Again with American encouragement, young Muslims were recruited to the 'cause' from the Arab and Islamic world, inadvertently creating a cohort that was to eventually form al Qaeda."

Cohen uses the words "concurrence" and "encouragement," but these are unsatisfactory descriptions: it is clear who the senior partner in this arrangement was. As the junior partner, Pakistan received a support package from Washington that included help with organization and logistics, military technology, and ideological support for sustaining and encouraging the Afghan resistance. Of these, the last was by far the most important, serving as it did to attract men and materiel from the Arab world and beyond to the jihad in Afghanistan. CIA funds went to buy advertisements inviting hardened and ideologically dedicated men to fight in Afghanistan, and a \$50 million U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) grant, administered by the University of Nebraska, Omaha, paid for textbooks that exhorted Afghan children "to pluck out the eyes of their enemies and cut off their legs." These were approved by the Taliban for use in *madrassas* (Islamic schools) and are still widely available in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Radical Islam went into overdrive as its superpower ally, the United States, funneled support to the mujahideen. Ronald Reagan feted jihadist leaders on the White House lawn, and the U.S. press lionized them. When Soviet troops withdrew from Afghanistan in the face of the U.S.-Pakistani-Saudi-Egyptian alliance in 1988, a chapter of history seemed complete. But the costs of this victory revealed themselves over the course of the next decade. By the mid-1990s, it was clear that the victorious alliance had unleashed a dynamic beyond its control.

WHITHER PAKISTAN?

“Pakistan has adapted to changing strategic circumstances,” Cohen observes, “by ‘renting’ itself out to powerful states, notably the United States, but also Saudi Arabia and China.” He warns that the September 11 windfall and the al Qaeda card will, beyond a certain point, cease to guarantee cash and support. And although economic growth is currently strong, Pakistan has a fundamentally weak economy that is deeply dependent on remittances from overseas workers. Low-tech textile exports are the mainstay of its industrial production, and its work force does not meet the requirements of a modern economy. The army, meanwhile, is strong enough to prevent state failure but not imaginative enough to push through major changes. In the long run, minimal economic opportunity, a booming birth rate, intensive urbanization, a failed educational system, and a hostile regional environment will result in a large, young, and ill-educated population that has few prospects for economic advancement and is susceptible to political mobilization by radicals.

Cohen ventures several reasoned—and reasonable—guesses as to Pakistan's trajectory, focusing his attention on the forces driving it in different directions. He thinks that the present system is likely to continue, but that certain trends (the rise of radical Islamist groups, revived ethnic and regional separatism) and possible disruptions (the loss of U.S. or Chinese support, a major war with India, a series of assassinations) could yet transform it.

An Islamist revolution is unlikely, but the gradual strengthening of Islamist parties will certainly start to affect the government's makeup. One possible scenario is the return of a military-civilian coalition government similar to that of Zia-ul-Haq, united by nominal adherence to Islamic doctrine. Of course, Pakistan's history does offer plenty of examples of leaders inviting disaster by making fundamentally wrong choices, so more extreme scenarios—civil war, the triumph of Islamist radicalism, the return of outright authoritarianism—can never be ruled out.

In the worst case, Pakistan would simply come apart, spewing nuclear technology and terrorists in all directions. What can be done to prevent such a disastrous outcome? How can the idea of Pakistan be made to work? A number of key reforms—some touched on, though not explored, by Cohen—are necessary.

First, Musharraf must be forced to take seriously his call for "enlightened moderation." He has, to the relief of liberal Pakistanis, sought accommodation with India, softened his stance on Kashmir, cracked down on Islamist terrorism at home, and begun to negotiate the revision of blasphemy and anti-woman laws. But as Najam Sethi, the editor of an influential

Lahore weekly, remarks, "the momentum of change is too slow and awkward and unsure to constitute a critical and irreversible mass." Sethi emphasizes two especially critical areas in which Musharraf must do more: packing up the jihadists, which means accepting that they are not the solution to the Kashmir issue, and reducing the influence of Islamist parties by facilitating the rise of moderate mainstream parties in free elections.

This latter goal points to the need for broad political reform in Pakistan to build responsible civilian leadership while keeping the military at bay. Cohen worries especially about declining U.S. influence over the Pakistani army, which he cites as a reason for growing radicalism in its ranks. But it is a mistake to think that anti-U.S. sentiment in the military stems from insufficient contact with its U.S. counterpart. Anti-Americanism reflects the general tension between the United States and the Islamic world, and more contact will not do much good, as is evidenced by the fact that, among the senior officers forcibly retired by Musharraf after his U-turn in Afghanistan, were those who had spent extended periods of time training in the United States. It is also a mistake to think that contacts with the U.S. military have historically fostered liberal and democratic beliefs in the Pakistan army.

Political reform must begin with the reversal of the legacy of Zia-ul-Haq, who set out to purge Pakistan of "the scourge of politics." He and his successors succeeded in depriving the Pakistani people of their means of self-expression and collective action, and popular politics at the national level has disappeared along with Pakistan's once-thriving trade unions, student groups, and peasant collectives. Thirty

Can Pakistan Work?

years ago, university students noisily argued over ideological positions and competed for votes in student elections. Today, there is no voting and no legitimate student government—just Islamic sectarian movements and groups defined by ethnicity pitted against one another. With Islamism as the only outlet for political involvement, these students are prime candidates for membership in extremist organizations. Unless political organizations are once again allowed to organize locally and nationally and intelligence agencies stop harassing critics of state policies, this “depoliticization” will push Pakistan further down the path toward instability.

The greatest threat to Pakistan’s future may be its abysmal education system. Pakistani schools—and not just *madrassas*—are churning out fiery zealots, fueled with a passion for jihad and martyrdom. The obstacles to reform are great. For example, recent street rampages by Islamists forced Musharraf’s former minister of education, Zubaida Jalal, to declare herself a fundamentalist and denounce as unacceptable school textbooks that do not include Quranic verses on jihad.

The United States, along with the United Kingdom and the European Union, has recently poured hundreds of millions of dollars into the Pakistani educational system—but with minimal effect. USAID officials in Pakistan have shown little inclination or desire to engage with the government on the issue of eliminating jihad and militarism from school books. Indeed, rather than calling Musharraf’s government on the continuing espousal of jihadist doctrine, the White House, out of either ignorance or compromise,

even praised former Education Minister Jalal for her “reforms.” Jalal’s successor, General Javed Ashraf Qazi, is a former intelligence chief known for his ruthless tactics. It therefore appears that Musharraf’s educational curriculum will go unchanged.

This difficulty, of course, reflects the underlying problems of Pakistan’s government. Aware of its thin legitimacy and fearful of taking on powerful religious forces, no reigning government has made a serious attempt at curricular or educational reform, quietly allowing future minds to be molded by fanatics. But without such critical reforms, the long-term prospects for Pakistan are anything but comforting. 🌐