The Politics of Common Sense

This book offers a refreshingly different perspective on Pakistan – it documents the evolution of the country's structure of power over the past four decades, and in particular how the military dictatorship headed by General Zia ul Haq (1977–88) – whose rule has been almost exclusively associated with a narrow agenda of Islamisation – transformed the political field through a combination of coercion and consent-production.

The Zia regime – and its successors – have inculcated within society at large a 'common sense' privileging the cultivation of patronage ties and the concurrent demeaning of counter-hegemonic political practices which had threatened the structure of power in the decade before the military coup in 1977.

The book demonstrates how the politics of 'common sense' has been consolidated in the past three decades through the agency of emergent social forces such as traders and merchants, as well as the religio-political organisations that gained influence during the 1980s. While these constituencies thrived on the back of the dictatorship, their rise is also organic inasmuch as capital has penetrated into society at large, leading to (often unplanned) urbanisation and the proliferation of informal market networks, initially in the secondary and tertiary sectors of the agrarian economy but more and more extending to manufacturing and service sectors.

The rise of individuals and networks 'from below' accords the patronage-based system its resilience – the similarities in background and outlook between the mass of working people and the political and economic entrepreneurs that act as intermediaries in a vertically-organised structure of power blunt counter-hegemonic impulses, religion often serving as the final source of legitimacy in a world that revolves around the ruthless accumulation of power and capital.

Aasim Sajjad Akhtar teaches at the National Institute of Pakistan Studies, Quaid-i-Azam University. Previously, he was at the Lahore University of Management Sciences. He has published widely on subjects as diverse as peasant movements, imperialism, informality and state theory.

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State, Society and Culture in Pakistan

Aasim Sajjad Akhtar

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For Amar
Who truly is forever

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Preface

While the plethora of literature being produced on Pakistan these days might suggest otherwise, writing a book about the country's politics, history and culture is a task fraught with difficulty. Quite aside from the popular stereotypes and misleading scholarship that one feels compelled to debunk, there has been little grounded research on state and society over a period of three decades which renders dated even substantive literature serving as a point of departure. The constant recourse to material produced in a different time and place can impede our understanding of the present as much as it helps to enhance it.

The task becomes even more challenging in an environment often hostile to 'traditionalist' conceptual and empirical debates about class, state and the like. Embodying this challenge is the work of Antonio Gramsci. On the one hand, Gramsci's ideas have very much become part of the mainstream (western) academy. On the other hand, this mainstreaming equates to Gramsci being invoked exclusively as a scholar of the discursive realm, separated by academic fashion from the materialist concerns which underlay his own efforts.

This tendency can be explained in part by the changing mores of western societies. As reiterated in this book time and again, Pakistan has also changed dramatically over the past few decades, and efforts to theorize state and society are doomed to futility without recognition of this (ongoing) process of change. The work of note on Pakistan to have emerged in recent times is based on this recognition, as well as the imperative of being critical of Eurocentric conceptual apparatuses. Yet, I sometimes feel that for all the 'newness' of such approaches, the proneness to aping trends in the western academy remains intact.

In this book, I have tried to generate insights in the mould of new-age post-colonial scholars that have grown up being suspicious of conceptual approaches associated with their predecessors, whilst insisting that it is still worth thinking about what this earlier generation uncovered. In short, we must not throw the baby out with the bath water. In practice, this means a book that tries to cover a lot of bases in a 'grand theorizing' way which is increasingly uncommon. I

recognize the shortcomings of such an approach, but I take this risk consciously. Let me explain.

What draws me to Gramsci is that, instead of a cold-blooded analysis of social and political forms, his method facilitates a much more grounded understanding of why people – and by this, I mean all sorts of people, even if Gramsci's emphasis is typically on the lowest orders of society – are motivated to action (or not) by different political imaginaries. Gramsci's ideological commitments demand that his analysis is always imbued by the question of how political imaginaries sustaining the status quo can be displaced by transformative ones.

In what circumstances, Gramsci asks, is the 'national popular collective will' generated? In short, Gramsci never steers too far from the political imperative of developing a shared vision of an egalitarian and just society. This, for him, is a prerequisite to building such a society.

For almost two decades, I have interacted extensively with working people across ethnic, religious and gender backgrounds, governing elites, the well-to-do chattering classes, religious functionaries, small and medium entrepreneurs, and professional groups such as journalists and lawyers. Most of these interactions have been while being active with social movements and everyday political struggles. The knowledge of society, its mores and the everyday considerations informing political action that I have thus acquired have not been from a 'neutral' vantage point. My political commitments have impelled me to think deeply about how and why the potentialities for counter-hegemonic politics have declined so sharply over the past 2-3 decades.

To state the obvious, politics in Pakistan is very different today than a generation or so ago. Indeed, the meaning and practice of politics has changed irrevocably all over the world following the demise of 'actually existing socialism' (and attendant proclamations of the *End of History*). I waded directly into active politics while capitalist triumphalism was unchallenged at the end of the 1990s. The incredible exposure afforded to me by political activism allowed me to experience– feel, even – the texture of a political field that has changed greatly since the heyday of radicalism in the 1960s and 1970s.

I have thus attempted to put together a somewhat grand narrative of continuity and change that can improve our understanding of contemporary political economy, social mores and the daily play of power relations. The purpose, as noted already, is to sketch a picture of Pakistan that builds upon the seminal treatises of the past and incorporates new empirical realities, all while critically engaging with innovative approaches popular in the contemporary period.

In truth, it does not take much to improve upon the scant literature on Pakistan that raises interesting questions and derives meaningful insights.

Accordingly, the major contribution that this book makes is to systematically demonstrate how the urban commercial classes and the religious right have forced their way into a structure of power which is based on the passive consent of the subordinate classes. While there have been many impressionistic offerings about the religious right and the intermediate classes over the years, linking their emergence to wider developments is important if we are to avoid either under- or over-stating their significance.

By illustrating how these emergent social forces are the major protagonists of the everyday politics of patronage in Pakistan, I hope to direct attention away from overemphasized and 'culturalized' themes like religious militancy and 'rogue' state behaviour. As is the case when trying to build a 'grand narrative' of state and society on the whole, there is also hazard in bringing under emphasized aspects of social and political life to the fore at the expense of overemphasized ones. But this, again, is a risk worth taking.

In the final analysis, I hope this book, with other efforts, helps scholarship on Pakistan turn a bit of a corner. Over the past few years, I have been fortunate to witness first hand the emergence of a number of young critical scholars educated in Pakistan and abroad. Despite the deep and pervasive legacy of dictatorship and the 'global restoration of class power', I am hopeful that this number will grow to become a critical mass capable of challenging the hegemonic intellectual – and political – order that prevails in contemporary Pakistan.

Acknowledgments

It would not be possible for me thank all the many people that have been sources of support and inspiration over the years that this book was written. As an accidental academic that took on a day job allowing me the most possible leeway to fulfil my political commitments, I have been privileged to know and learn from many comrades over the course of a political struggle that is almost two decades old. Quite aside from my being terrified at leaving out even one name that matters, it is also in many ways appropriate that I do not name anyone. The struggle for a more just and equal world has persisted for almost as long as human society itself, and many have come and gone along the way. The vast majority of those who have given of themselves for the cause of human emancipation have remained nameless. So it will be in the future too. To the many who have journeyed with me in the present – I do not need to name you for you to know how important you have been to me.

I thank my students at the Lahore University of Management Sciences, where I taught between 2003–09, and Quaid-i Azam University in Islamabad, where I still teach today. I have been lucky to come across so many vibrant young people who inspire tremendous hope for the future. I have always enjoyed the classroom and it has been a major site of learning for me over the years as I have tried to make sense of the social order in Pakistan. Some of my students have become friends as our paths have criss-crossed, and I am the richer for it.

It is difficult for me to separate intellectual from political influences, but it was as a doctoral student – which I was for a very brief time – that I first recognized what it means to think deeply about words and the ideas hidden within them. For that, I must thank Sudipta Kaviraj, who was able to relate to my political leanings, yet encourage me to experiment. Matthew Nelson was generous and extremely efficient, and the environment at SOAS suited my kind perfectly, not least of all in allowing me in and out very quickly.

I must thank the editors at Cambridge University Press, and particularly Lucy Rhymer and Qudsiya Ahmed for taking on what turned out to be a rather long project. The production team in Delhi was very patient and put in many

hours during the editing phase. Anonymous reviewers helped shape the book into the form that it has finally taken, while thanks are due to the handful of (again nameless) people who read portions and offered suggestions at different stages. I am particularly grateful for the extremely tedious logistical work done by Annam Azeem at my home institution of NIPS at QAU towards the bitter end when I was unwilling to even look at the manuscript.

I have joked with those close to me that this book was written by three different people, spread out over many years. The second of those people was based at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) on the National University of Singapore campus in the summer of 2014. I thank friends at ISAS for the opportunity they provided, and hope that I can eventually take them up on their repeated offers to return.

Being in Singapore allowed me to spend some time with my family, which justifiably protests that it has not seen enough of me over the years. Despite my choosing a radically different life trajectory to theirs, my parents, Ruby and Sajjad, have continued to do what parents do –offering support through thick and thin. My brothers Usman and Emaad, and Saba, Esa and Hasan – much love to you. My extended family saw more of me as a student than they see now, and while I have not been in touch with them as much as I could, they have been, and will always be, a big part of my world.

I do not count many intimate friends, and in recent years have only developed close ties with comrades in the struggle. I am lucky, however, to still be in touch with childhood friends from Singapore, and those who I made later as a teenager and (very) young adult in New Mexico and Chicago. AB and the bracas deserve special mention. I see most of them rarely now, but would like to believe that they all know how important they remain to me.

Finally, to the family that I became part of and is now my own. My grandparents – and *Nani* in particular – were the only family I had when I first moved back to Pakistan almost eighteen years ago. Soon afterwards, I became involved, perhaps inevitably through shared political commitments, with a kinship group (could not help it!) unlike anything I had ever come across before.

To Asha – thank you for sharing so much with me and helping me grow in the process; I am grateful that our journeys continue to be intertwined, not least of all because of our boy. Hajra has taught me dignity and grace, Pervez the value of remaining steadfast in one's commitments, and Neil's friendship has been the most unexpected, but a lovely surprise. And then there is Alia, who has taught me the most important lessons of all, helping me uncover all that being human and loving someone entails.

Last, but most definitely not least, there is Rumi. It is to you that I dedicate this book, the first version of which was written as you came into the world. I know that you will inherit even more difficult challenges than my generation has done and can only hope we bequeath you something to take forward. In the meantime, know that every passing day that I get to be your Abba, I am reminded that I am the luckiest person alive.