

Review - Pakistan: A Hard Country

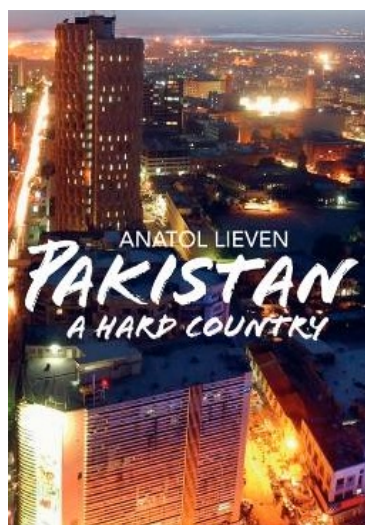
Written by Mickey Kupecz

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MICKEY KUPECZ, AUG 10 2011



Using an approach that is as much anthropological as it is historical or political, Anatol Lieven's *Pakistan: A Hard Country* provides a more intimate portrait of the country than other recent publications.[1] It also lends a fresh perspective on a country that is often misunderstood by Western observers.[2] The book's central message is that Pakistan is cohesive and dysfunctional all at once. He writes, "If there is one phrase which defines many aspects of

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Pakistan... it is 'Janus-faced'; in other words, many of the same features of Pakistan's state and government which are responsible for holding Islamist extremism in check are at one and the same time responsible for holding back Pakistan's social, economic and political development" (p. 4). While governance is chaotic and state services minimal, Pakistan is highly unlikely to collapse or succumb to radical Islamist elements. The resulting tone of the book is one of "on-the-one-hand, on-the-other-hand."

The analysis bypasses political structures and historical records and instead examines the communal nature of Pakistani society. The feudal kinship networks that makeup Pakistan have resulted in a system that deteriorates governance through extensive patronage networks. Votes are given at the behest of local leaders with the expectation of a job, protection, or other favors in return. Lieven writes, "In so far as it is intertwined with patronage and family allegiance, corruption is an integral part of the system as a whole" (p. 207). This eventually corrodes the functioning of the economy, social services, the police and judiciary, and other necessary organs of government.

At the same time, feudal rivalries dampen extremist tendencies by both undercutting ideological fervor and fragmenting political power. One quote by a Lahori interviewee is revealing:

"If I were to jump on a box and preach revolution, with the best programme in the world, you know what would happen? First, people from all other provinces would say that we can't follow him, he's a Punjabi. Then most of the Punjabis would say, we can't follow him he's a Jat. Then the Jats would say, we can't follow him, he's from such-and-such a *biradiri*... So you see we Pakistanis can't unite behind a revolution because we can't unite behind *anything*" (p. 11-12).

Because Pakistani society is largely based on bonds of kinship, groundswell movements are constantly undercut by competing loyalties. This makes radical reform, be it religious, economic, or social, nearly impossible.

The organization of *A Hard Country* seems to reflect the chaos of the country it seeks to describe. Chapter topics jump from structural topics (religion, justice, and the military) to a set of chapters dedicated to the different provinces. The concluding section deals with the rise of the Pakistani Taleban. This detracts from the book's overall coherence but it also allows Lieven to cover the aspects of Pakistani society he considers most important.

A second criticism of the book is the treatment given to Balochistan. Ethno-national Baloch rebels have been fighting a low-level insurgency for years, claiming marginalization and exploitation by the Punjabi-dominated federal government. Their cause has gained the ire of the military, resulting in a wave of killings and disappearances, as well as the sympathy of international observers and human rights organizations. Lieven depicts the Balochs as a motley bunch of brutal and opportunistic warlords, in conflict with each other as much as they are with the state. He may be correct in some of these assertions but he should keep in mind his own point: Pakistan does not exist in black and white but rather in shades of grey.

The crescendo of the book examines the rise of the Taleban. Based on his own experiences in the Northwest Frontier Province before and after the Taleban's takeover of parts of the region in 2007-2009, Lieven brings home a point often lost on Western observers. While the vast majority of Pakistanis oppose the Taleban, neither do they support turning guns on them. Public opinion sees a counterinsurgency campaign against them as an American-funded war against fellow Pakistanis and fellow Muslims. In fact, the only thing Pakistanis may be able to unite behind is anti-Americanism.

As such, Lieven admits that while the state will struggle to combat the Taleban, the last thing the U.S. should do is put boots on the ground in Pakistan. Such a move would cause massive indignation amongst the populace and could cause a split between pro- and anti-American factions in the military, the country's only stable institution. He even predicts the army would likely fight American troops under such circumstances. The furor caused by the Osama bin Laden raid, even within the military, attests to this. On the other hand, Pakistan is unlikely to balkanize along ethnic lines or fold to Islamic extremism. It will remain as it always has been, a nation beset by religious, ethnic, and political conflict which has paradoxically moderated the state. *Pakistan: A Hard Country* presents a convincing case for the permanence of the Janus of South Asia.

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[1] For example, Stephen Cohen's excellent history *The Idea of Pakistan*.

[2] Bruce Reidell's recent *Deadly Embrace*, for instance, serves as an excellent doppelgänger to Lieven.