Pakistan, the Landed State

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BOOK REVIEWS

Politics, Landlords and Islam in Pakistan by Nicolas Martin; *Routledge: London & New York, 2016; pp 192, ₹795.*

Pakistan has tended to register on the pages of the Western media, and concomitantly in the minds of its average viewers, along two interrelated grooves. It is seen either as a country irrevocably embroiled in so-called Islamic violence of one form or another—be the orchestrators "honour-killers," Taliban-linked groups, or sectarian outfits. Or as a country enmeshed in violence, to be sure, but with a saving grace: its liberal elites, who are celebrated for challenging the supposed dominance of religious conservatism with their unrivalled tolerance of diversity, their capitalist development and, at times, their support for the Pakistani state's military offensives and the broader "War on Terror." So often does reportage reproduce these twin narratives of Islamic violence and its liberal rectification, that they can now be said to constitute tropes in the popular representation of the country.

Unsurprisingly, these tropes have not remained within the ambit of journalism. Recent mainstream scholarly work on Pakistan has also been complicit in their reproduction. For instance, Anatol Lieven (2012: 66), in his widely-read *Pakistan: A Hard Country*, declares Pakistan to be "a highly conservative, archaic, even sometimes quite inert and somnolent mass of different societies." Stephen Cohen's (2004) *The Idea of Pakistan* conjoins similar assessments, with explicit recommendations for the US, in collusion with Pakistan's pro-Western elites, to heighten its political and economic interventions in the country, no doubt to awaken the rest of this slumbering nation. Invariably, much of this analysis, whether scholarly or journalistic, tends to represent the country as overrun by "mad" fundamentalists and militant Islamists (or more sombrely, by "archaic" and "highly conservative" masses) while prescribing capitalist development, militarism and/or liberal democracy as the antidote.

Within this context, Nicolas Martin's book should be welcomed, for it destabilises the broader orientalist dualism through which Pakistan is conventionally registered: as a country caught between pre-modernity and modernity (and all that tends to be clustered under this term, including liberal democracy, equality and capitalism). The study also challenges other dualisms (such as the separation of economic and political power, capitalism and feudalism, and "free" and "unfree" labour). One problematic dualism, however—that between Pakistan's military and civilian regimes—remains in place. Martin's book then can be read as an effort, albeit not always a successful one, to disrupt some of the dualistic categories through which Pakistan comes to be an object of intrigue, understanding, debate and, most disturbingly, foreign intervention.

Based on close to two years of ethnographic fieldwork in a village (given the pseudonym "Beg Sagrana") in Sargodha district of Pakistani Punjab, one of the study's main contributions is to show how rival landed elites (capitalist farmers) compete in the electoral contest in the province's rural areas to consolidate their class power. Electoral success—be it seats in local, provincial or national assemblies—provides the elected with development funds, direct access to lucrative contracts, control over local police forces and the informal authority to adjudicate land disputes: all of which, especially in this context, secure the conditions for capitalist expansion. Electioneering itself has become a strategy for capital accumulation, such that any distinction between economic and formal political power becomes difficult to sustain.

It is also through elections, especially local elections, that successive military dictatorships have aimed to confer legitimacy on their rule. From Ayub Khan's Basic Democracy to Pervez Musharraf's Devolution Programme, local governing bodies and local elections—for seats in councils at the village, town and district level—have merely been attempts, according to an International Crisis Group report (2004: 4), "to cloak a highly centralised, authoritarian system of government under the garb of decentralisation." Martin observes this upfront, as he happened to be in the field for the 2005 local elections. Two local factions, each headed by a large capitalist farmer, were competing for seats in the union council, the lowest tier in General Musharraf's Devolution Programme, which typically has authority over several villages. One faction was aligned to the Pakistan Muslim League—Quaid-e-Azam (PML–Q), a party in full support of Musharraf's military regime; another was attached to the Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz (PML–N), a party that was ousted from power by Musharraf in the 1999 military coup and whose leader, Nawaz Sharif, was in exile at the time.

Martin records the different measures taken by Musharraf and the PML–Q to ensure that their allied faction won the most council seats: substantial financial support from government coffers reached their candidates (who often used the funds to purchase votes outright); police forces were mobilised to harass and even imprison rival candidates; and friendly polling officers were placed at certain polling stations so that rigging could proceed unencumbered. It is precisely these sorts of tactics that delivered astounding victories to pro-Musharraf councillors, in Sargodha and elsewhere, in the 2005 local elections. In all likelihood, it also accounts for the bewildering 97.5% approval given to Musharraf's regime following the April 2001 referendum. The positions of both, the landed

elites (or at least those allied to Musharraf) and the regime itself, were bolstered by these local elections, a relationship that sociologist Hassan Javid (2011: 358), also writing on rural Punjab, describes as one of "mutual structural interdependence."

Some of the advantages political office confers on the landed must, however, inevitably be shared with subordinate classes, if only to ensure that voters maintain their allegiance to the landed until the next electoral season. Political leadership carries with it the obligation to do *kaam*, or work, for the villagers, especially the supportive ones. This very selective channelling of state resources to subordinate classes Martin refers to variably as gatekeeping or patronage. Whatever the term deployed to capture this process, it would be a mistake to view the rural politics of which it is an outcome, a politics that engages and brokers with the state, in optimistic or celebratory terms. It is precisely in these terms, however, that Anatol Lieven (2012: 41) views rural patronage-based politics, suggesting that its redistributive impulse, especially along kinship-lines, promotes the general welfare of the poor.

Partha Chatterjee (2004) of the subaltern school, in a slightly different idiom, argues that this politics, which he labels "the politics of the governed," democratically empowers the poor, as the state is obliged to become more responsive to their needs. Martin's ethnographic stance, however, one that is also more attuned to the dynamics of class, leads him to a more critical perspective: only a small fraction of state funds are actually channelled to subordinate classes, and very unevenly and selectively; most are appropriated by landed politicians for their private gain. The result: village infrastructure (hospital, roads, school) remains on the whole underdeveloped, and the very conditions that compel (by that "dull compulsion") subordinate classes to seek out patronage in the first place remain unchanged. Neither redistributive nor democratically empowering electoral democracy reproduces capitalist class inequalities.

Though successive military regimes have certainly contributed to this state of affairs, especially with their legitimacy-seeking devolution schemes, it would be misleading to attribute blame squarely to the military. This, however, is what Martin repeatedly tends to do. "Landed power in Pakistan has largely remained intact," Martin (2016: 176) states at one point, "because the military and authoritarians have repeatedly made alliances with factions within the landed political class." Yet Pakistan's political parties also bear responsibility. Though commonly remembered as a pro-poor populist politician, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, founder of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), also relied on the country's landed gentry to secure the electoral victory for his party in 1972, and enable him to establish the first democratically elected government in Pakistan's history. Indeed, the late Pakistani sociologist Hamza Alavi (1983) suggested that the military coup that eventually toppled Bhutto and brought General Zia ul Haq to power a few years later could be accounted for, in large part, by the contradictory class forces upon which the PPP hinged its support.

During Bhutto's five years in power, he shuttled between appeasing landed classes, by expelling radical socialist ministers from the party for instance, and antagonising them, as when he proposed in July 1976 to nationalise the agro-processing industries in which the landed had a stake. The cumulative effect of these paradoxical manoeuvres was to alienate Bhutto's base of support amongst both the propertied and property-less, paving the way for General Zia to make a bid for power without significant opposition.

Dominant parties, in addition to military regimes, have clearly also pandered to landed elites, a fact that Martin's own fieldwork reveals as well (though he does not draw out the full implications of this). During the 2005 local elections that he observed in Sargodha, the ousted PML–N attempted to regain influence by absorbing within its party's apparatus a member of the local landed elite (and his allied faction) who happened to have a rivalry with the pro-Musharraf candidate (also a member of the landed elite, head of a different faction). In their respective bids to secure local electoral dominance, the two parties, PML–N and the pro-Musharraf PML–Q, exploited this rivalry, one that had less to do with ideological differences than with competing economic interests. A worm's-eye view of Pakistan's political parties—a view attentive to the intricate strategies and alliances they devise to secure and maintain power—makes one suspicious of claims, made by party officials among others, that party differences are a matter of ideology and/or policy. Especially in conjunction with historical evidence, what this worm's-eye view also calls into question is the claim that military regimes shoulder the principal responsibility for the reproduction of landed power. Scholarship on civil–military relations in Pakistan has tended to juxtapose too sharply the civilian and military regimes: a dualistic framing that Martin also reproduces, despite his own ethnography suggesting otherwise. Indeed, despite what General Musharraf (2006: 65) himself conceded in his memoir, *In the Line of Fire*, "whatever the law, civil or military, the poor are always the victims of oppression."

Strategic Collaborations

Thus, landed elites have secured and augmented their economic position through strategic collaborations with ruling regimes, be they dictatorial or democratically elected. What precisely is the class character of the landed elites? On this front, Martin is rather unequivocal. By heavily subsidising inputs (such as tractors, tube wells, fertilisers and high-quality seeds) and by instituting land ceilings, the green revolution, inaugurated by Ayub Khan in the 1960s and continued by Bhutto in the 1970s, produced a class of capitalist farmers in central Punjab. However, the trajectory in Beg Sagrana, perhaps for contingent reasons, deviated slightly from what was observed in other parts of central Punjab. Because green revolution reforms placed restrictions on the amount of land that could be held under feudal sharecropping arrangements (under Ayub Khan, this was generally 500 acres), many landlords began to put any land over this ceiling under the so-called self-cultivation. Self-cultivation was simply a

euphemism for farming done by labourers as opposed to tenant sharecroppers. Under Bhutto's programme, tenant–cultivators would be given formal land rights: by designating land "self-cultivated," landlords could also circumvent this reform. Studies of Punjabi villages by scholars such as Shahnaz Rouse (1983), Hamza Alavi (1973) and Saghir Ahmad (1977) hence document large landlords becoming capitalist (or at least semi-capitalist, in that some land remained under sharecropping) farmers. This trajectory is reminiscent of the "Prussian Path" discussed by Lenin (1977): of feudal lords themselves transitioning into capitalist farmers. Sharecroppers are dispelled in the process, and in Beg Sagrana, conditions that made it necessary for subordinates to seek out patronage, and to vote and support elites accordingly, were installed.

Unlike other central Punjabi villages, however, the dominant landlords of Beg Sagrana—who belonged to a patrilineal group (or *biraderi*) known as the Makhdoom, which claimed descent from a Sufi saint—were unable to circumvent green revolution reforms. Their accumulated wealth was conjoined with a desire for a westernised urban life and a disdain for rural life and politics. This doubly absent landlordism—absence from rural life and absence from rural politics—meant the Makhdooms did not have the connections with local bureaucracies that would have allowed them to expel sharecroppers and evade the anti-landlord aspects of the green revolution more generally. Some land became the property of sharecroppers. Other land was captured by a smaller landlord biraderi given the pseudonym Gondal: a biraderi with bureaucratic connections and which, by the time of Martin's fieldwork, became economically and politically dominant in the village. Any electoral competition Martin observed during his fieldwork, such as the 2005 local elections, was between factions within the Gondal biraderi itself. If anything, the demise of the Makhdooms was instructive to the Gondals: participation in local politics and connection with local state apparatuses was essential if one wanted to avoid the former's fate.

These small Gondal landowners may have transitioned into capitalist farmers, as landlords did in other parts of central Punjab, but they did so by replacing the previously dominant Makhdoom landlords. By defying the expected Prussian-like Punjabi path—not to mention the other paths Lenin (1977) once labelled "American" (capitalist farming without feudal predecessors) and "English" (capitalist tenants in contradiction with feudal lords)—this trajectory of agrarian change vindicates an observation made by Jairus Banaji (2002: 115) that unilineal theories of agrarian change should be snubbed in favour of an attentiveness to the multiple trajectories and forms through which labour may possibly be subsumed to capital.

Multiple Trajectories

Indeed, not only does Martin's book demonstrate that there may be a variety of *trajectories* towards agrarian capitalism, but it is also alert to the various *forms* of labour's subsumption to capital. Bonded or unfree labour is one such form, a form whose continued persistence in Beg Sagrana challenges any neat separation between feudal and capitalist forms of production.

Citruses are the principal form of crop grown in Beg Sagrana, a crop whose cultivation, barring the harvesting season, is not very labour-intensive. Maintaining a large pool of bonded farm labourers throughout the year—shouldering, that is, their year-round costs of reproduction—would be financially unwise for Gondal farmers. Instead, farmers employ "free" wage-labourers only during harvesting (and that through contractors), a so-called freedom for workers that permits farmers to procure and forfeit labour on demand. When bonded labour is used, it is for jobs that require year-round labour activity such as house and farm servants. The reason for bonding is not lack of labour supply, for the expulsion of sharecroppers after the green revolution produced more than enough potential workers in Beg Sagrana; rather, bonding through debt is a means to drive down the price of labour. Loans are extended on condition that the wages that will be used to service them are less than labour–market norms: a wage-gap that is effectively a disguised form of interest in a context where interest is, for Islamic reasons, forbidden. By attending to these varieties of labour procurement and their corresponding logics, Martin disavows any notion that "free" and "unfree" labour are mutually antagonistic forms, or that capitalist production represents a decisive break from feudal relations. Rather, capitalist farmers can and do use both free and unfree labour on the same enterprise; the only difference between the bonded labour of today and that of pre-capitalist pasts is its subsumption to a logic of capital accumulation.

Martin's discussion about the persistence of bonded labour is not a tangent, but connected to his larger argument

about what I have termed the landed state. For it is this imbrication of Gondal farmers with the state apparatus that both creates the conditions in which subordinate classes must seek out loans (just as they must seek out patronage more broadly) *and* ensures that indebted labourers do not abscond. Elected farmers can and do mobilise the police to capture runaways and/or to evict the defaulter's relatives from their homes, precipitating conflict within families. In this way, class antagonisms against landlords may be displaced onto kin, and capitalism itself safeguarded.

Class antagonisms are also displaced, or at least blunted, by a particular Islamic ideology that circulates within Beg Sagrana. Here, capitalist farmers aimed to legitimise their prosperity with recourse to a Sufi Islamic tradition that associates wealth and its acquisition with godliness. Martin draws on the work of James Scott, especially his *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), to suggest that subordinate classes do not entirely concur with this articulation. Rather, they have their own counter-hegemonic Islamic ideology, one that refuses an easy equation of wealth with piety, and also a counter-hegemonic Islamic praxis in which religiosity is outwardly displayed, in contrast to the landed elite's avowal of a more ascetic Islam. The ironic effect of this contestation over Islamic ideology and praxis, Martin points out, is to buttress, rather than challenge, landlord dominance. Subalterns, if and when they find reason to criticise elites, criticise them in terms of their individual (im)moralities, not for their dominant position as a class in the class structure. Islamic ideology, in his view, thus conceals the social relations that reproduce the domination of subordinate classes. However, this is a rather flat-footed assessment of religious ideology on Martin's part, for might not subaltern inflections of Islam also potentially constitute the discursive terrain from which an assault on the landed, as a class, might be launched? Put in more Gramscian terms, this subaltern Islam is an aspect of their *senso commune* that contains a kernel of critique, one that only needs to be refined, so as to lean more heavily on political economy rather than morality, and extended towards landlords as a class rather than landlords as individuals. This task, of extension and refinement, is precisely what constitutes, for Gramsci (1971: 330), a "philosophy of praxis." There are certainly examples within the so-called "Muslim world" of popular Islamic ideas and practices being mobilised, in refined and extended form, towards emancipatory ends (Iran and the politics of Ali Shariati being the most notable example).

My criticisms notwithstanding, Martin should be commended for presenting us with a book that conducts a sustained assault on some of the dualistic tropes that orient conventional accounts, popular and scholarly, of Pakistan. For in the ethnographic canvas he paints of rural Punjab, forms of unfreedom, bondage, and inequality are shown to be, not antithetical to capitalism and liberal democracy, but fundamental to their reproduction.

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