

Book Review

Akhtar, Aasim Sajjad. *The Politics of Common Sense: State, Society and Culture in Pakistan*
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Dr Akhtar's new book on Pakistan is an ambitious and ultimately a pessimistic one. Its central argument is that ever since Zia-ul-Haq, the Pakistani public sphere has been mostly devoid of any socially progressive impulses. Collective action, and class-based collective action in particular has almost entirely disappeared, leaving the political sphere in the hands of atomised, self-seeking individuals and religious ideologues. Akhtar tells us that the 'issues that affect working people on a daily basis—particularly those related to employment, as well as access to basic amenities such as education, health and housing are virtually absent from the political and intellectual mainstream' (Akhtar: 171). Far from being unique to Pakistan, these observations will echo with scholars concerned with the absence of political debate and action regarding social inequality and poverty across South Asia, but also beyond.

Through brief case studies, ethnographic type observations, and anecdotes, Akhtar wants to demonstrate how the vast majority of Pakistanis engage in what Gramsci calls 'the politics of common sense'. Through the 'politics of common sense' people do not seek to reform the social and political order; they instead navigate their way through it, making use of patron-client ties in order to secure their private interests. However, Akhtar argues that people do not make use of patron-client ties because they regard them as intrinsically valuable, as Piliavski (2014) would have it. Subalterns, in particular, know that the politics of common sense leaves them at the mercy of frequently exploitative patrons. They are not the victims of false consciousness, but instead 'come to see the world they inhabit as inevitable and inescapable. They may not like their subordination, but they cannot see how things could possibly be other than as they are' (Akhtar: 6.).

Barrington Moore (1966) famously argued that where there was no bourgeoisie, there was no democracy. Akhtar's book does not directly address Barrington Moore, but it effectively contradicts him. The book seeks to show how the personalised politics traditionally associated with the Pakistani landed elite

has persisted despite the emergence of a large middle-class—or what Akhtar usually refers to as 'the intermediate classes'. The reason why the Pakistani middle classes failed to usher a rule-based democratic order is that the state and its allies—or what Gramsci calls 'the historical block'—co-opted them into their patronage networks. The second major reason is that the Pakistani state deployed a conservative Islamic ideology in order to eradicate the progressive left.

The 'intermediate class' that began to emerge in the 1960s was made up principally of traders, transporters and migrants returning from the Gulf. Akhtar argues that this new intermediate class cuts across the rural-urban divide, and suggests—drawing on previous scholarship—that it constitutes almost one-third of Pakistan's total population. In a chapter entitled 'Accumulation in Practice' he provides short ethnographic sketches meant to illustrate how instead of 'ushering the social formation towards the impersonal, rational-legal Weberian ideal-type' (Akhtar: 88), grain traders, contractors, and transporters all engage in the type of personalized patronage politics that was once primarily associated with the landed elite.

Akhtar argues that it was Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who opened the gates for the incorporation of the intermediate classes into state patronage networks when he first politicised the bureaucracy and packed it with loyalists, and that it was General Zia-ul-Haq who went on to incorporate them. As a result of these developments, vernacular forces displaced the English speaking elites that had once prevailed in bureaucratic circles and became the dominant force in an increasingly politicised bureaucracy. Altogether, these developments meant that the state lost some of its erstwhile autonomy and 'power to direct the nature of change within the social formation' (Akhtar: 47).

Akhtar argues that the increasingly blurred line between state and society provides grounds to rethink Hamza Alavi's classic

description of the Pakistani state as overdeveloped and autonomous in relation to dominant proprietary groups. Alavi argues that none of the three dominant-proprietary groups in post-colonial societies—namely the landed class, the indigenous bourgeoisie, and the metropolitan bourgeoisie—can control the state. As a result, the state displays a certain autonomy and ability to act independently of social pressures.

Akhtar argues that today this is no longer the case. What we now see is that ‘capital [through the intermediate classes] has penetrated deeper into Pakistan’s society and has started to evince greater autonomy from the state, and the latter has appeared to fragment’ (Akhtar: 33). The problem with Alavi’s formulation—Akhtar argues—is that it cannot account for the dynamism of society, and for the eventual emergence of social forces that might undermine state autonomy.

The incorporation of the intermediate classes into state patronage networks is the first reason for the institutionalisation of the politics of common sense. The second reason is Islamisation. Like others before him, Akhtar also argues that Islamisation—particularly during and after the Zia regime—served to entrench Islam as the state ideology of Pakistan further and to eradicate most if not all traces of leftist politics. For Akhtar, the eradication of the left by Islamic forces effectively left Pakistan with no alternative to the politics of common sense. Here, once again, it was the intermediate classes who played a decisive role. By embracing Islamisation, they became complicit in the process that caused the marginalisation of progressive political forces. Less convincingly perhaps, Akhtar argues that the intermediate classes embraced Islamisation out of material self-interest. Because Islam is the state ideology of Pakistan, traders embraced it to strengthen their relationship with the state and to continue to benefit from it. Akhtar purports to show that people join or engage with Mullahs for jobs, government contracts, and for help with the police and the courts (*thana* and *katcheri*). Islam also serves traders’ and merchants’ material interests because they ‘demonstrate their religiosity to customers as a means of providing legitimacy to their profiteering’ (Akhtar: 88). In this account, Islam is little more than a vehicle that helps people fulfil their material self-interests.

Like a number of Pakistani scholars, Akhtar plausibly depicts Islam in Pakistan as a socially conservative force that was deployed by the ruling elites to de-legitimise resistance to class and state power. He disagrees with accounts such as Humaira Iqtidar’s (2011) that suggest that scholars should acknowledge the liberating potential of movements that happen not to be secular. Akhtar believes that Islamic inspired movements in Pakistan have generally betrayed the hopes of their supporters. Referring to his research in the Swat valley, he reports that most people, most notably women, who initially supported the Swat Taliban—because the latter promised to bring justice to Swat—ended up losing faith in them after they gained power.

Akhtar argues that unlike Islam, ethnicity was once a progressive force in Pakistan. Because the Punjabi- and Mohajir-dominated state excluded Sindhis, Balochis and Pakhtuns from the exercise of power, the nationalism of the latter groups was purportedly always based on an ideology of resistance; hence the frequent historical ‘symbiosis’ between ethnicity and class in parts of Sindh, Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunwa. However, Akhtar tells us that potentially radical ethnic politics has unfortunately also succumbed to the politics of common sense. While, for example, the Pakhtun Awami National Party may have once been committed to restructuring the Pakistani state, it is now primarily concerned with providing its supporters with patronage. We are told that the same is true of the Baloch nationalists. Here overall, Akhtar seems to assume a connection between ethnic and progressive politics, and offers little theoretical justification for this. As a result, he seems to overlook differences between progressive and conservative elements within the various ethnic movements discussed.

Finally, and most importantly, class politics has likewise partially succumbed to the politics of common sense. This capitulation is apparent in the case of the tenant farmers on the Okara military farms who successfully struggled against the threat of eviction at the hands of the military. During their struggle, the tenant farmers managed to bridge their class, gender and religious divides. However, once their struggle was over, ‘traditional caste divisions, land-related and other disputes re-emerged’ (Akhtar: 148), and the tenants fell back into the tried and tested ways of patronage politics. Akhtar reports that the same is broadly the case with the Worker and Peasants Party in the Peshawar valley and for *Katchi abadi* dwellers in Karachi.

Akhtar’s key insight here, drawing upon EP Thompson’s (1963) work on the English working classes, is that class is not a pre-existing social category but instead one that emerges out of the shared experience of struggle. Thus shared class interests united the Okara tenants, the workers and peasants of the Peshawar valley, and the *katchi abadi* dwellers in Karachi when each of these groups faced external threats and coercion. However, they all reverted to more parochial politics once that external threat had disappeared. Akhtar suggests that the state and its allies have avoided the use of coercive force precisely because ‘it alone actually undermines the hegemonic system’ (Akhtar: 157). Instead, they used a far more effective tactic: selective co-optation.

This book, as indicated at the outset, is an important one, not least because of its scope and ambition, but also because it raises important questions about the apparent lack of progressive impulses in Pakistani politics. Like others before him, including this author (Martin 2015), Akhtar emphasises the disempowering side of patronage politics in Pakistan, but he in addition raises the important question of why patronage politics persists despite the rise of the intermediate classes. Moreover, as Akbar Zaidi (2014) has argued, Akhtar

also raises a number of necessary critical questions on Alavi's oft-cited conceptualisation of the Pakistani state.

Having said this, the conceptual framing of the book, and the evidence used to corroborate its central argument feel somewhat incomplete. Let us begin with the evidence. Perhaps because the book needs to cover lots of material in order to make its claims about the condition of the Pakistani polity as a whole, the evidence presented is often fragmentary and partial and gives the impression of selective use of evidence. When arguing, for example, that traders and others partake in the politics of common sense, Akhtar does not consider the possibility that they may also be concerned with ideologies and political party programmes. If Pakistani voters only care about patronage, why does the PPP maintain a vote bank in Punjab despite having been out of power there for several decades? Recent work on Indian politics (Chibber & Verma 2018) suggests that—contrary to received wisdom—Indian voters care about party programmes and ideologies, and that clientelism is only one part of the story. When he tells us that traders are committed to Islam for instrumental reasons, he does not consider deeper, non-instrumental, reasons for why people believe what they believe. Finally, when he tells us that ethnic politics in Pakistan has been a progressive force, he doesn't tell us much about conservative elements within Pakistan's ethnic movements. While these omissions do not necessarily invalidate Akhtar's core arguments, they do make them less convincing than they might have been.

Regarding the conceptual frame, Akhtar's arguments suggest that despite the emergence of the intermediate classes, nothing fundamental has changed in Pakistan. Pakistanis today engage in clientelistic politics just as they did during British times. The only difference is that the actors involved are no longer the same. The reason why Akhtar does not see any real change is possibly a product of his view that only secular and radical leftist politics can bring about genuine transformation. Throughout the text, Akhtar keeps indicating that only radical, class-based politics can alter the status quo in and that for this 'a radical political subject that is not bound by apolitical middle-class aspirations' (Akhtar: 172) needs to be rehabilitated.

Moreover, Akhtar does not expect much from Pakistan's reported democratic consolidation over the past decade. His mistrust of formal democracy is apparent when he claims that '[p]olitical patronage—and all its discontents—is a defining feature of Indian democracy' (Akhtar: 164) despite over half a century of democratic rule. Many scholars would disagree.

Formal democracy in India has permitted countless Indians to struggle for their rights, and although many of these struggles have failed, some have not. Moreover, despite its glaring flaws, Indian parliamentary politics has not been entirely devoid of merit. To cite just one example, Andrew Wyatt (2013) has shown how in Tamil Nadu electoral competition has produced a gradual shift towards programmatic or policy-based politics and away from clientelistic politics.

Because Akhtar does not consider the possibility that a transition towards a more programmatic form of politics could happen through formal democracy, and given that class politics in Pakistan is by his reckoning more or less dead, we are left to conclude that change is nowhere on the horizon. However, change can and will happen even in the absence of broadly secular and class-based political movements. Akhtar himself seems to unwittingly suggest that the 'hegemonic system' is unravelling when he claims that capital has become increasingly autonomous from the state, and that the state itself is fragmenting. If this is true, and therefore the state is becoming subordinate to society, then one might expect to see the emergence of a more competitive political situation where political parties increasingly compete in terms of programmatic appeals. The resulting changes may not conform to secular leftist ideals, but they would nevertheless require scholarly attention. While not a secular leftist moment, the election of Imran Khan on a popular mandate to eradicate corruption would itself require attention. It could, for example, be interpreted as indicative of an incipient shift towards programmatic politics. On this front, however, this otherwise ambitious and thought-provoking book has little to say.

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