

Book Review

Khan, Ayesha. *The Women's Movement in Pakistan: Activism, Islam and Democracy*. 398pp., I.B Tauris 2018

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Titled *The Women's Movement in Pakistan: Activism, Islam and Democracy*, Ayesha Khan's book is a comprehensive and nuanced account of the history of the Women's Action Forum (WAF). This reading of the women's movement is particularly pertinent at this juncture in Pakistan's history for two reasons. First, WAF's activities unfolded in the context of an over-vigilant state, hyper-sensitive to dissent, under Zia during Pakistan's second martial law regime (1977-1988). Whilst it may be simplistic to view the shrinking space in present-day Pakistan for free speech and critical debate as exactly the same, the subversive element to organising around resistance and rights discourse today is disturbingly reminiscent of the first phase of the movement, as explicated so well by Khan. Second, nearly forty years on, we have a new generation of women speaking out in Pakistan. Their struggle – be it in more vocal and provocative protest on the streets, or as members of the rising labour force in universities, the media or in parliament – stands on the shoulders of WAF's resistance and activism, irrespective of whether these women identify as feminists or not. Sustained collective action by this group of women shaped the early discourse around gender and social justice in Pakistan, and continues to determine the current legislative and policy agenda and reform around women's rights.

Khan does not rush to introduce WAF and instead spends the first two chapters of the book describing the political context around the Cold War, including the shifts within the Muslim world and the rise of political Islam. It is not until chapter 3 that she details the birth of WAF during Pakistan's harsh martial law regime under Zia. The book traces the meandering, some may argue reactive, trajectory that the movement followed through the turmoil and disillusionment after Zia's death. This was a period marked by periods of fledgling democratic rule, as well as the creeping but sure spectre of religious extremism and talibanisation during Pakistan's third martial law regime under Musharraf (1999-2008). Khan argues that this historicising is essential, because

women's rights and freedoms in Pakistan continue to be shaped by the parameters of the resistance that emerged during the Zia regime.

The emergence of WAF during Pakistan is documented through the voices and memories of women at the forefront of the movement, many of whom continue to be active and remain vanguards of the struggle. The book is full of anecdotes of secret meetings and friendships forged during these turbulent times. There are accounts of street protests and arrests interwoven with the stories of women who suffered directly under draconian laws like the Hudood Ordinances. Khan's ability to weave in these stories is a reminder that the movement that she so painstakingly details was a fight against the discrimination and sexual violence anchored in the political and social context of those times. The movement organised itself around discriminatory laws and policies that affected the lives of women across socio-economic classes, religious affiliations and ethnicities, though the impacts on their freedoms varied. This nuance is sometimes lost in the oft-heard critique that WAF was elitist and unrepresentative of all women in Pakistan, or that it failed to build greater momentum across class. Often analysed without context, WAF has been evaluated against what it could have become, rather than what it stood for in the times within which it evolved. This is not to suggest that critical analysis is not important, but it would do well to temper it with an understanding of the daunting complexities that determine women freedoms in Pakistan, past and present. It requires a perspective that considers the real lives of the women who took the stands and risks that they did, and in doing so, shaped the discourse around the woman question in Pakistan, a lens that Khan uses well.

In the book Khan also responds to a growing body of scholarship which questions the relevance of western secular political ideas in Muslim countries and critiques WAF's secular politics as influenced by western feminism. In outlining the political project of WAF, Khan positions the

movement as a struggle for a secular and inclusive democracy with equal rights for all citizens irrespective of sex, ethnicity or religious affiliation. This struggle is rooted in a context of resistance in a state beset by unstable democracy, a praetorian military and the appropriation of religion, where the status and agency of women become arenas for political point-scoring and markers of legitimacy for both state (military and civilian) and non-state actors. In a climate such as this, she convincingly argues for the need for a secular feminist discourse. A discourse that rejects US and western global imperialism *as well as* revisionist Islamist discourses that romanticise the Islamic tradition and in so doing enforce an agenda of exclusion that lends itself to religious bias and extremism.

As Khan suggests in her introductory chapter, we have in Pakistan ‘a new generation so garbled in their understanding of the relationship between state, society and Islam, they blame Malala Yousafzai for bringing a bad name to her country because she was shot by the Taliban and celebrated abroad’ (Khan: 2). In this climate, a book that carefully charts the context and course of a social justice movement that rejected military rule and Islamisation can contribute to an understanding of why we stand at this juncture in Pakistan’s history.
