

Book Review

Siddiqi, Ayesha., *In the Wake of Disaster: Islamists, the State and a Social Contract in Pakistan*. 186pp., Cambridge University Press 2019

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In the Wake of Disaster advances a range of theoretical arguments through an examination of the political aftermath of massive flooding events in the lower Indus Basin in 2010 and 2011. Siddiqi interrogates post-disaster political spaces through political theories of social contract, citizenship, and social protection entitlements. Her field work was conducted in three southern districts of Sindh, Pakistan – Thatta, Badin, and Tharparkar – over seven months in 2012-2013. She presents a three-pronged argument. First, that the state plays a large, perhaps even dominant, role in the political imagination of people in rural Sindh. Second, that effective state intervention, especially through the distribution of emergency relief funds, averted famine and social collapse in the region in the wake of flooding disaster. And third, contrary to dominant media narratives, Islamist networks active in relief efforts in the region did not mount an effective challenge to the legitimacy of the state.

This last argument plays a large part in framing Siddiqi's book. Her objective with this argument is to counter the panicked narrative that emerged in the aftermath of the floods that Islamist groups like Jamat-ud-Dawa (JuD) were successfully competing with the Pakistani state for political legitimacy. Siddiqi effectively dismantles this myth by drawing on her ethnographic field observations and interviews with members of the Pakistan army (which conducted relief operations), the JuD, and people in disaster relief camps. She finds that where the JuD did operate, it did so with the permission and indeed the cooperation of the army – the most powerful branch of the Pakistani state apparatus. The fact that the army is not at odds with Islamist groups will not come as a surprise to most observers of Pakistani politics – but it is nevertheless an important point to make in the context of disaster relief.

Moreover, Siddiqi notes that the JuD very carefully manages its rhetoric to ensure that no explicit political motivation for its relief operations is visible. Her assertion is thrown into bold

relief by comparing the JuD's rhetoric with the aggressively anti-state rhetoric of another, much smaller, Islamist group operating in the post-disaster political space: the Sipah-e-Sahaba (SeS). While the JuD emphasized the humanistic motivations of their relief operations, one of Siddiqi's SeS interviewees "believed that that the 'absent state' needed to be replaced by the SeS taking control of the government" (p. 147). By comparing Islamist relief operations across the three Sindhi districts, each with a distinct political-demographic configuration, and by comparing political discourse between different Islamist groups, Siddiqi forcefully refutes the narrative that the Indus floods allowed Islamist groups to capture political space in the post-disaster context.

One of strongest aspects of the book is Siddiqi's sharp comparative analysis, which she deploys internally to her study sites in the three districts, and externally with respect to the formation of post-disaster political spaces from other parts of the world. The 'internal' comparative analysis is strongest in Chapter 2, "The State as a Complex Web of Social Relations", where the author leverages her deep knowledge of the region to paint an intimate picture of local political dynamics in each district. This is done to evidence her first argument: that people in rural regions, often portrayed as politically "backward" in Pakistan, do in fact imagine themselves to have a direct relationship with the state. Like her argument concerning Islamist political capture, Siddiqi's objective here is to counter a powerful policy and academic discourse about the politics of Pakistan. This is that Pakistanis, and especially rural Pakistanis, access politics primarily or even exclusively through powerful local patrons or 'big men' – and thus will only vote local landlords and/or hereditary religious notables (*pirs*) into power. Instead she finds a powerful role for personal charisma (Thatta), political parties organising activity at the grass roots (Badin), and religious sentiment (Tharparkar) in maintaining electoral power in her study region.

The external comparisons Siddiqi makes with other regions of the world are less thorough, but interesting nevertheless. She draws parallels between the 2005 Katrina disaster on the Gulf Coast of the US and similar experiences and narratives of the failed social obligation of the Pakistani state to come to the aid of citizens suffering in the aftermath of a natural disaster. She invokes the 1999 Marmara earthquake to present a contrasting case of political capture, where local NGOs seemingly were on the verge of wresting away some political legitimacy from the Turkish state in the post-disaster political space. Most intriguingly, Siddiqi draws on cases of extensive social protection programs from different countries in the world to situate the Pakistani relief operations. Mentioning cases from South Africa, India, Brazil, and Mexico, Siddiqi effectively situates the citizen-based cash transfer policies of Pakistan in the wider global turn to greater social protection of the poorest in the late 2000s.

Siddiqi's most interesting argument concerns the effectiveness of the relief program implemented by the Pakistani state, covered primarily in Chapter 4: "Advancing Disaster Citizenship". The Citizen Damage Compensation Programme (CDCP) entailed the distribution of ATM cards loaded with a set amount of cash directly to *all* residents of flood-affected areas. Siddiqi argues that this policy was "designed to be universal and inclusive, limiting elite capture and leakages, but did not go so far as to declare such disaster response a 'right' of all affected households" (p. 114). Instead, the Pakistani state officially declared that the CDCP was delivered to the Pakistani public as a "gift" or "favour". Despite this official disavowal of responsibility, Siddiqi argues that both the disbursers and the recipients of CDCP cards on the ground interpreted the program as an explicit right of all Pakistani citizens. Like the post-Katrina situation in New Orleans, then, people understood the state – *not* local notables, landlords, or kinship group leaders – to be responsible for the post-disaster welfare and subsistence of Pakistani citizens. Siddiqi sketches the conditions of possibility for the CDCP according to several factors, including: the global turn to social protection programs, the extensive coverage of the Pakistani population through the computerized ID card and registry system (the National Database and Registration Authority, or NADRA), and the 2008 ascent of the relatively pro-poor Pakistani People's Party and the cash-transfer to the poorest policy which this party ushered in, the Benazir Income Support Programme. Siddiqi argues that the CDCP, building on a wave of social protection policy nationally and globally, rapidly responded to and indeed even expanded the citizenship entitlements of some of the poorest and most vulnerable Pakistanis and effectively prevented famine and complete social collapse in the region. This is a welcome corrective to the usually pessimistic diagnosis of the Pakistani state apparatus as predatory, self-serving, and administratively incapable.

Nevertheless, the argument concerning 'disaster citizenship' would have benefited from greater reflection and extension. Siddiqi does provide compelling evidence that rural Sindhis

turned to the state in their hour of need and that the state responded. She is thus able to argue that a form of citizenship that posits a direction relationship between individual citizens and the central state exists in Pakistan and was revealed and perhaps even enhanced by the 2010 and 2011 flood disasters. What has not been demonstrated was how 'disaster citizenship' is related to what might be referred to as 'everyday citizenship' – the trials and tribulations faced by the mass of the population in navigating the social and political landscape from week to week, month to month, and year to year. How do Pakistanis access social services like hospitals, schools, water, gas, and electricity? Do they invoke the state – or do they turn to the local 'big man'? How do Pakistanis navigate the punitive institutions of the state – the police and the courts (the so-called nexus of *thana-kutchery*)? How, if at all, does 'disaster citizenship' illuminated by the immediacy of disasters relate to this more mundane and everyday type of political struggle for entitlements and access? It is possible that people invoke the central state as the only imaginable entity with the resources to intervene in the post-disaster political space – but revert to the more traditional forms of patron-based politics for most of their needs. Siddiqi does acknowledge that citizenship and clientship are not mutually exclusive forms of political being – but does not sufficiently trace the relations and linkages between the two.

In a more theoretical register, Siddiqi misses an opportunity to engage with the scholarship in geography and the critical social sciences that draws on Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics and the extensive literature this has generated. The concept of biopolitics can be summarized as the modern state's concern with the cultivation of life and management of the life-cycle. This involves harnessing social expertise to depict the people of a territory as a knowable "population" that can be continuously measured, cultivated, and shaped. The Foucauldian notion of population can be contrasted to a type of liberal social contract theory that tends to understand state power in relation to an aggregation of individuals. Foucauldian theory suggests another way of understanding the distribution of NADRA cards and emergency aid – as population management, rather than citizenship empowerment. Given how the Pakistani state represses protest movements – including around other "natural" disasters such as the Attabad landslide in 2010, but also numerous other citizenship-based struggles, especially from the country's peripheries and borderlands – a biopolitical framing might have generated a more critical and nuanced, if admittedly less optimistic, way to frame the analysis.

While Siddiqi does develop valuable theoretical insights – namely, that citizenship is a historically and geographically specific construct – the liberal foundations of social contract theory are limited by a relentless fixation on the individual. This contrasts with the relational and irreducibly *social* human of critical theory – and all the power imbalances and structural pressures this implies. Greater engagement with the concepts developed by Foucault – not to mention Gramscian concepts of hegemony and common sense, or Giorgio Agamben's

notions of sovereignty and exception – would have helped Siddiqi squeeze more critical insight out of her rich ethnographic data and to develop a picture of the Pakistani state/population relationship that is more alive to its inherent unevenness and contradiction. To be fair, the book is understandably careful not to stray from the ethnographic field site. Still, the author's field work offers a solid foundation from which a more ambitious theoretical understanding of state power in Pakistan can be constructed. Perhaps this is a trajectory the author will pursue in future work.

Siddiqi's book is an extremely valuable contribution to the recent history of state formation in Pakistan, the politics of rural Sindh, and the political geography of post-disaster space. It will be required reading for students and scholars concerned with any of the above topics, as well as political geographers of South Asia more broadly. Given the likelihood of an increased frequency of flooding and climate variability around the world, the book will also be of interest to the general reader interested in the political dimensions of hazard, especially in South Asia.
