

Book Review

Mufti, M., Shafqat, S., Siddiqui, N., ed., *Pakistan's Political Parties: Surviving Between Dictatorship and Democracy*. 321pp., Georgetown University Press 2020 (Folio Books in Pakistan)

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In general, social scientific analysis of Pakistan's political sphere has tended to ignore the role of political parties. The literature, instead, has retained focus on deep-seated military power, the structural exigencies of post-colonial state-building, and social transformation in historically agrarian conditions. Within these frameworks, political parties have often been relegated to the status of under-formed organisational manifestations of factional elite or particularistic class power, or as vehicles for the perpetuation of praetorian interests. Either way, actions carried out by parties in and outside of government are often reduced to the broader structural determinants of Pakistan's political economy, or are attributed in some way to the only institution that is granted determinative agency, the military.

There is little doubt that parties in Pakistan have remained organisationally weak actors according to measures of elite recruitment, interest representation, and ideological articulation. Much of this is conditioned by the limitations imposed by a praetorian political system and the legacy of authoritarian rule. At the same time, it is also important to note that mainstream parties from across the ideational and sociological spectrum continue to survive, function, and evolve, often having an integral and arguably causal impact on political outcomes. In fact, since the resumption of procedural democracy in 2008, one can plausibly argue that party competition and partisan affiliation have become more entrenched and integral to the functioning of politics than at any point in the past.

It is exactly this corrective that a new volume, *Pakistan's Political Parties: Surviving Between Dictatorship and Democracy*, offers to extant accounts of politics in the country. Edited by Mariam Mufti, Sahar Shafqat, and Niloufer Siddiqui, the volume consists of 14 substantive chapters (along with an introduction and conclusion), divided along

three thematic concerns – form, function, and survival. Their primary aim, as laid out in the introductory chapter, is to analyse political parties in an environment of institutional imbalance induced by a powerful military (p. 3) and an increasingly assertive higher judiciary. Simultaneously, however, this volume views parties as actors not just conditioned by that imbalance but as agents that rework it in myriad ways as well.

The importance of this framing and the resulting analyses cannot be understated. Pakistan's parties are a set of diverse actors, often representing distinct social and political phenomenon. As the editors and authors lay out in the first section, Pakistan's party system represents ethnic/regional concerns and ideological expressions of Islamism, as well as more mainstream catch-all manifestations. These concerns and expressions have evolved in multiple ways, shaped by the institutional constraints of military interventions, but also by concerns over intra-party control, and internal debates and deliberation on policy, legacy, and ideology.

Saeed Shafqat's chapter on the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PMLN), for example, is the first systematic account of the party's evolution from a vehicle of authoritarian interest to a large mainstream party with popular appeal, mirroring the trajectory of its leader, former PM Nawaz Sharif. Here the party's frequent contention with the military high command, its leadership's centralising tendencies, and its sociological mooring within the urban business and lower income classes of Punjab have played an important role in its transformation.

Another outstanding contribution in this section is Anushay Malik's review of Leftism within the party landscape, and her detailing of the role that leftist parties have played in shaping political discourse and policy, despite limited electoral success. A country far too often viewed abroad (and

domestically) from within the prism of Islamist politics, Malik's account highlights the historical evolution of left politics in the country, and the coercive constraints imposed on it by authoritarian governments. Conclusively, however, she establishes that leftist parties have played an integral role in shaping important political debates on minority community representation, labour rights, and foreign policy.

While documentation of party system forms and party survival are integral contributions, in my view the biggest strength of this volume lies in its second thematic area, viz. party functions. As mentioned earlier, existing macro-analyses of Pakistani politics tend to detach politics from its micro-foundations (such as motivations and incentives) and are heavily reliant on broad caricatures. For example, it is clear that patronage politics is important in shaping linkages between the state and citizens and that parties often function as intermediaries in this dynamic. However, variations within patronage politics, the reasons why some parties are better suited for it than others, and the extent to which patronage and clientelism itself are evolving under structural and institutional transformations such as urbanisation and democratisation often remain understudied.

The second section of this book delves into these issues and more in considerable detail and with significant methodological variation. For instance, Sameen Mohsin's outstanding contribution fashions a systematic account of politician-bureaucrat relations and their importance in understanding patronage variations and service delivery outcomes. Liaqat, Cheema, and Mohmand's chapter on party-voter contact situates questions of inclusion and representation in everyday politics within the urban context of Lahore – one that has rarely received such systematic attention in the past. Drawing on experimental survey data, their finding that party attention remains channelled to narrow sections of the electorate that are unrepresentative of broader demographics is an important one and highlights weakness in party infrastructure.

A similar issue is taken up by Sarah Khan, who sheds light on the important issue of multiple tiers of exclusion that women candidates face in the electoral realm. Her contribution in this volume centralises the importance of party incentives and how they meld with structural gender constraints on women's autonomy and decision-making in producing suboptimal outcomes. It also provides valuable prescriptive options worth exploring for parties themselves, in so far as electorate views may be shaped positively by increased contact with women candidates; direct elections to reserved seats at the local level may provide a pathway for such change.

Within the black box of party politics itself, an important and understudied aspect that this section deals with is the interplay between candidates and parties, covered by Hassan Javid and Mariam Mufti in their chapter as they interrogate candidate-party persistence and defection. By way of a methodological contribution, Javid and Mufti introduce a systematic analysis

of candidate type that will help observers move beyond caricatured accounts of untethered 'electables' constituting the entirety of the political elite.

The third and final section of the volume deals with the age-old question of party survival and strategy in the face of institutional constraints imposed by a dominant military and an increasingly assertive judiciary. While the former is a question tackled well by noted scholar of civil-military relations, Ayesha Siddiqi, it is the second issue – of the judicial imprint on party politics – that extends the analytical landscape to incorporate the post-lawyers' movement transformation in the political sphere. Yasser Kureshi's account both historicises party-judiciary relations across different eras, and helps make sense of the judiciary as an important political actor that operates, and often mediates, between the exigencies imposed by the military establishment and the claims of frequently ambitious political parties.

While the volume scores highly in terms of analytical and methodological value, there are several gaps that subsequent work can certainly help overcome. For starters, there is a dearth of sociological reflection on parties and their relationship with various socio-economic strata. An analytical account of party support bases, drawing on polling data, can help situate party trajectories and decision-making amidst changes in underlying voting coalitions.

Secondly, the documentation of party histories requires more substantive work, especially for understudied parties like the PMLN and the PTI. The accounts offered in this volume are important starting points, but remain curtailed by space constraints. Combining party history with sociological insight into party-voter ties can further enrich our understanding of these issues.

Lastly, future work should also look at party evolution, civil society ties, and their impact on policymaking at the federal and provincial levels: What are the interest groups that parties cultivate and react to? How do these vary from party to party? These are important second-order questions that deserve attention if we hope to develop more comprehensive understandings of power and decision-making in Pakistan.

Overall, there is little doubt that *Pakistan's Political Parties* marks an important, multi-faceted breakthrough in the study of Pakistan's politics and the particularities of institutional power and form found within its political sphere. As such, the editors and authors deserve considerable appreciation for the work that they have put into it. From a readership perspective, the general language, analytical style, and accessibility of the volume make it well suited for both a social science academic audience looking to study Pakistan in a comparative or singular perspective, and to more curious general readers as well.