

Book Review

Saif, Mashal., *The 'Ulama in Contemporary Pakistan: Contesting and Cultivating an Islamic Republic*. 332pp., Cambridge University Press 2020

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The traditionally educated religious scholars of Islam, the *'ulama*, wield tremendous influence in Pakistan. They can mobilise substantial crowds, call for the implementation of specific aspects of Islamic law, and even derail government initiatives. Existing academic studies have approached this diverse group mostly through their legal, theological, and political writings. Mashal Saif's *The 'Ulama in Contemporary Pakistan: Contesting and Cultivating an Islamic Republic*, by contrast, attempts to add exciting and nuanced ethnographic engagement. Her extensive fieldwork and conversations in various *madrastas*, mostly in Lahore but also including other localities in Punjab, aims to provide a "humanistic study of traditional Muslims – a group ordinarily dismissed by liberal Muslims and demonised by the Western media" (p. 21). The most significant insight of this provocative, rich, and theoretically informed study is perhaps that the *'ulama*'s thought and action is shaped by the modern nation state in more profound ways than they themselves would care to admit. Saif criticises existing scholarship on *'ulama*-state relations for focusing only on the state's "physicality and materiality" and how institutions and politicians have tried to manage religion. In her reading, the consequent lack of engagement with Foucault's notion of governmentality has prevented us from appreciating how the *'ulama* are themselves turned into "citizen-subjects", who have internalised the workings of the modern nation state and support its sovereignty and interests (pp. 10-14).

Saif explores how the *'ulama*'s "outlook, behaviors, desires and intellectual traditions" (p. 14) have been impacted by the state across five chapters. While chapters 1-3 delineate the perspective of a wide range of Sunni thinkers, chapters 4 and 5 elucidate the role of Shi'i *'ulama*. The first chapter discusses the curious case of the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII), which demonstrates in the author's view that the state in Pakistan has not managed to subjugate the religious sphere to its will (pp. 52-53). Considering debates surrounding the Hudood Ordinances in 2006 and the Divorce Law Controversy in 2008, Saif argues that significant opposition

from the *'ulama* meant that the CII was displaced as an "epistemic authority" (p. 59). Yet, this rejection of state-led reform did not mean that the clerics set themselves up as an alternative authority, independent from the political structure. Rather, they were interested in redefining the CII and tilting membership in their favor. Saif considers here "non-state *'ulama* as active agents in the continuous process of state formation and state Islamisation" (p. 66). These points are very well taken and brilliantly demonstrated. The chapter gives rather short shrift, however, to the historical genesis of the CII and why there was a period when the modernising Pakistani state in general and the CII in particular faced less opposition from the *'ulama*. Saif explains that the Council was "most vibrant" during Pakistan's early decades and that "during that time the council's recommendations were often viewed as less contentious" (p. 68). It could have been productive here to discuss the declining fortune and fumbles of Islamic modernist thought and its relationship to the Pakistani state, as detailed by Muhammad Qasim Zaman in his *Islam in Pakistan: A History*.

Chapter 2 covers the assassination of the governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer, in 2011. Saif details how Taseer's criticism of Pakistan's infamous blasphemy laws and his public support for Asia Bibi, a Christian woman detained from 2009 until 2019 on the charge of having insulted the Prophet Muhammad, irked a diverse group of *'ulama* to the point that they publicly accused him of apostasy (p. 116). In Saif's reading, the question as to whether Taseer's subsequent murder by his own bodyguard, Mumtaz Qadri, can be justified boils down to the question "of who has the right to declare the insulter as worthy of death and to carry out the death sentence". Is this the prerogative of the state? Or of God through "His sovereignty vested in His law, the shari'a" (p. 86)? Several *'ulama* from both the Deobandi and Barelvi traditions claimed that the state had no right to pursue the case against Qadri. They held him innocent because "according to the *shari'a* insulting the Prophet is such a grievous crime that anyone can legitimately commit sovereign violence against a

Prophet-insulter” (p. 84). The author repeatedly insists that such a position faithfully reflects an early Islamic consensus (p. 88 and p. 92). This is a problematic argument to make. While there were certain authors such as Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) or Taqi al-Din al-Subki (d. 1355) who held this view (p. 88), the issue does not seem to have been a primary concern of religious scholars through the ages. Michael Cook’s magisterial study on *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought*, for instance, does not discuss blasphemy as a concern of premodern ‘ulama. It is unlikely that they ever in fact had the authority to “prescribe the death penalty for this crime” in the way the Pakistani penal code does (pp. 90-91). Saif’s insistence on the “orthodox” character of the ‘ulama’s position is also difficult to square with a further major intellectual underpinning of the book. She engages closely with Wael Hallaq’s study *The Impossible State* to argue that the entire premodern epistemic system of the *shari‘a* has been subverted by the totalising pretensions of the modern nation state. In combination with her argument that all ‘ulama have been shaped by the state, which supposedly includes those who call for Qadri’s innocence, this move rings slightly hollow. Is it really possible for Qadri’s defenders to claim the high ground of *shari‘a*-authenticity, untainted by the state? By the same token, this reviewer does not really follow Saif’s subsequent argument that the Pakistani state acted in a “self-centered” way when its judiciary rejected the ‘ulama’s extrajudicial religious arguments (p. 107). Saif here seems to operate with a questionable understanding of the premodern relationship between religion and state in Muslim majority societies when she argues that in this (not further defined) period “most ‘ulama’s views and decisions [...] [were] automatically enforced by state power” (p. 68 and p. 281). Such a straightforward implementation only applied, roughly speaking and with significant historical variations, to the rulings of officially appointed judges (*qadis*), not to the majority of ‘ulama whose juridical opinion had no binding character (Burak 2015, Fernandes 2002, Müller 1999, Tillier 2021). At the same time, Saif seems to criticise those contemporary Pakistani ‘ulama, such as the Gujranwala-based Deobandi scholar ‘Ammar Khan Nasir, who defended the state’s monopoly over violence. She sees these scholars as being suspiciously close to the interests of the state. Drawing on Hallaq, Saif holds that “such attempts at reconciling the state and the *shari‘a* are ultimately misguided since no overarching theoretical reconciliation can be reached” (p. 132).

The third chapter of the book turns to a related discussion, namely how the ‘ulama assess the religious character of Pakistan and in which cases they would condone an armed insurrection against the state. Saif sets the tone by, again, drawing on Hallaq. She writes that “(W)ith the eradication of *shari‘a* society by colonial powers and the nation-state, Muslims across the world, particularly those with an interest in political projects, are left yearning for the moral states and societies of the premodern era” (p. 151). It is this yearning that underpins two approaches which map onto early theological positions. The author stipulates that the conceptualisation of

those ‘ulama “who liken the state to a Muslim, albeit one who is deficient in some important practices, resonates with the claims of the Murji’ah”. This means that they accept the Pakistani state as Islamic as long as its constitution declares this belief and identity, seen as equivalent to an individual Muslim uttering the Islamic declaration of faith, the *shahada* (p. 164). By contrast, other ‘ulama (Saif also places the trained medical doctor Ayman al-Zawahiri of al-Qaeda in this category (p. 154)) “who view the state as un-Islamic based on its lack of adherence to Islamic orthopraxy [...] hold views similar to the Khawarij” (p. 164). Yet, crucially, they anthropomorphise the state, too. Saif asserts that both opposing positions reflect in fact how the ‘ulama rethink established Islamic political categories by transferring views applying to individual Muslims to the corporate nature of the nation state: “Thus, centuries-old concepts such as conversion, belief, disbelief, apostasy, rebellion against political authority (i.e. individual rulers), etc. are modified in the contemporary era as they are made to speak to entities that have only recently come into existence” (p. 184). Saif sees the ‘ulama thus engaged in a process of “cultural translation” and of bringing together “two distinct intellectual canons” (p. 184). Saif’s carefully conducted fieldwork really pays off here as she is able to involve several ‘ulama in very enlightening discussions. It seems to me, however, that she might give the ‘ulama (or at least those she interacted with) slightly too much credit as far as their engagement with modern political concepts is concerned. Their usage of terms such as “democracy”, “dictatorship” or “parliamentary system” (p. 285, fn. 12) does not necessarily betray a deep theoretical engagement with these terms. This comes to the fore when she quizzes a Shi‘i scholar about his understanding of secularism, a concept which he frequently referred to in their conversations: “By secularism I mean ... umm ... Well, you are the one who knows English ... If there is any other meaning to it, let me know ... By secularism I mean ... umm ... What does secularism mean? ... Freedom of association ... If there is a specific definition of secularism, I am not aware of it.” (p. 251). How Pakistani ‘ulama deal with political theory and post-Cold War liberalism would make for a fascinating comparison with the Iranian discourse since the 1990s. As Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi has shown in *Revolution and Its Discontents*, Iranian reformists made use of “ideas of Western liberal and often explicitly anti-communist thinkers such as Popper, Hayek, Aron and Berlin” (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2019, p. 40). They drew on these Western authors and their rejection of “ideological thinking” in order to stigmatise the supposed totalitarian tendencies of their Iranian opponents (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2019, pp. 213–224).

Chapters four and five are particularly strong since here Saif manages to engage certain Shi‘i ‘ulama in frank and fascinating discussions about their views on the Pakistani state. The author spells out that it is the “specter of violence” which drives a broad range of Shi‘i approaches to politics that are united by the desire to achieve protection for their minority community (p. 201). Saif advances the crucial argument that

Shi'i *'ulama* thus “perpetuate the idea, image or fantasy of the state as an effective political entity working for its citizenry, despite evidence to the contrary, including the state’s alleged involvement as a vital actor in anti-Shi’a violence” (p. 191). This perpetuation functions independently of whether they advocate for a secular state, a “sectarianly unaligned Islamic state”, or a state that follows Iran’s model of governance (p. 34). The broader implication of this is, according to the author, that Shi’is and other “minority Islamic sects can inadvertently drive majoritarian impulses, cultivate a rigidly homogenous state and consequently work against the very minorities that articulate them” (pp. 275-276). Yet, Saif also adduces some Shi'i *'ulama* who advocate “eschewing the state entirely”, which would, consequently, lead to a delegitimising and weakening of the state (p. 232). This partly has to do with propagating a transnational Shi'i identity that takes Iran as a point of reference. The Lahore-based Shi'i scholar Jawad Naqvi, for example, “promotes the art of not being governed by the Pakistani state apparatus” (pp. 232-233). While this is a thought-provoking proposition, I would think that Saif downplays in this context the historical appeal of Pakistan not only as a state but also as a novel and captivating political idea (Devji 2013). Shi'is were always eager to claim that they belonged to Pakistan, too – and had actually helped bringing the state about. Even the closely Iran-aligned Jawad Naqvi is not primarily interested in dissolving Pakistan’s Shi'is in transnational allegiances. Rather, by applying the model of the Lebanese group Hezbollah, he aims to assert Shi'i power and to carve out self-confident political space in Pakistan – or to even take over the state.

In sum, Mashal Saif has written a highly-readable, stimulating new work on Pakistan that takes the *'ulama* seriously and grants its readers unprecedented close access to their (political) thinking. This in itself is not a small feat: the author details throughout the book how challenging it was for her to navigate the male-dominated spaces of various *madrasas*. Her tremendous ethnographic skills unearth precious new insights and will reshape the scholarly debate on Pakistan’s *'ulama*. Saif underlines how the engagement with the state, contesting it while also cultivating it, remains a crucial condition for religious scholars in the contemporary period. She holds that her findings do not only apply to Pakistan: rather, her proposed framework “provides a new way of understanding relations between clerics and states, as well as states’ impact on clerics not just in Pakistan but in the dozens of other countries where the state claims an Islamic identity” (p. 290). It is hoped that the author will spell out these implications in more details elsewhere. The present work, unfortunately, only casually refers to the experience in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, for instance. *The 'Ulama in Contemporary Pakistan* does not elucidate to what extent the absence of institutions such as state-run *madrasas*, the office of the Grand Mufti of the Republic etc. make Pakistan perhaps more of an interesting outlier rather than a representative case for the study of *'ulama*-state relations in the modern age.

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