

Book Review Article

Why do the rural poor participate in electoral politics under conditions of structural inequality?

Review: Mohmand, Shandana K., *Crafty Oligarchs, Savvy Voters: Democracy under Inequality in Rural Pakistan*. 298pp., Cambridge University Press 2019

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Conventional accounts of electoral politics in Pakistan have emphasised the dominant role of landed elites in shaping politics in rural areas. Rural Pakistan is defined by unequal patterns of land ownership. The foundations of this structural inequality were laid during the colonial period when an unequal property rights regime was established to privilege loyalist classes through preferential access to land and political representation. While this historically embedded structural inequality continues to cast a long shadow over the political horizon, electoral politics remains highly competitive in Pakistan where the rural poor, the large majority of whom are landless, frequently participate in the democratic process. This raises an interesting puzzle: Why and how do the poor participate in electoral politics when they are structurally disadvantaged in local power structures? And, what does democracy mean in conditions of structural inequality, defined by a yawning gap between land owning political elites and landless voters?

In a refreshingly original and well-researched book, *Crafty Oligarchs, Savvy Voters*, Shandana Mohmand addresses these puzzles by combining insights from carefully conducted field work and fine-grained empirics. Mohmand draws her empirical material from the Sargodha district in central Punjab, an area that was historically exposed to profound social engineering in the wake of canal colonisation (1885-1940) that extended the frontier of irrigation by bringing Punjab's wastelands into cultivation. Leveraging historical variation in colonial land settlement policies, Mohmand compares patterns of political engagement in two types of villages, the *Colony* villages where colonial policy favoured a few large landowners and *Crown* Villages where land was granted in smaller parcels to a larger number of families. As she shows, these initial differences have shaped subsequent patterns of political participation in a milieu where the power

of landed gentry has been circumscribed by fragmentation of land, growing political competition, and socio-economic change. Using insights from her field research, Mohmand shows that while the landed aristocracy continues to enjoy dominance in the *Colony* villages, competitive electoral politics has opened a more dynamic political space in *Crown* villages where landless voters strategically bargain for public goods and are actively engaged in "collective organisation and political action".

A major analytical contribution of this work is in its conceptualisation of "vote blocs" and the empirical demonstration of how such vote blocs work in practice. Politics is a multi-layered process with several intermediary actors. Taking the focus of analysis away from landed politicians and landless voters to a meso actor, the leader of the village vote bloc, known in popular parlance as *dharra*, Mohmand adds a substantial nuance to the study of rural politics. While the working of these vote blocs is conditioned by established patterns of rural inequality and higher-level electoral competition, they open up a space for strategic bargaining within a village between voters and leaders of these vote blocks who are often landowners (*zamindars*) and help to organise local voters, aggregate voter demands, and connect them with the state. Such vote blocs were particularly activated during the era of non-party politics in the 1980s under General Zia-ul-Haq. However, they have persisted under both military and civilian dispensations after General Zia's departure. These vote blocs give political voice to the marginalised voter, allow them to strategically bargain for public goods, and constitute a form of horizontal political action. However, they are somewhat disconnected from party-based politics and operate within the larger institutional environment of structural inequality rather than posing a direct challenge to it.

In probing the impact of landed gentry on rural politics there are two polar views among scholars working on Pakistan. The first view established by an earlier generation of Pakistani social scientists (and still popular among lay commentators) considers the feudal mode of politics as a central feature of rural politics. The second view emphasises that the role of landed elites in rural politics has dramatically declined and it is no longer the salient explanation for political underdevelopment. In a sense, both these perspectives are false, and stem in part from the failure to account for temporal and spatial variation. An important contribution of Mohmand's analysis is to bridge this divide by unpacking both landed power, categories of political actors, and voters. In short, she unpacks "politics under inequality" and retrieves the agency of the marginalised rural voter, thereby providing an important explanation for their robust political participation despite the constraints posed by historically embedded land inequality.

In developing her argument, Mohmand carefully situates her findings against the four dominant explanations: the role of feudal elites, kinship (*biraderis*), clientelism, class or party-based political association. None of these explanations, she believes, can fully explain why "landless rural voters strategise, bargain, and negotiate their way to better livelihoods and services within this system" (p. 27). Mohmand displays the best of her empirical craft through the judicious use of mixed research methods that combine survey, archival, and multiple regression analyses. While the empirical analysis is predominantly qualitative in nature, there is an important longitudinal dimension aided by the author's focus on villages in Sargodha, a district studied by at least two influential social scientists in the past, Shahnaz Rouse and Saghir Ahmed. This allows the author to document important patterns of continuity and change in the same district over time.

Conceptual and theoretical relevance

Demolishing an over-simplified picture of rural politics as dominated by vertical ties of dependence that subordinate the political voice of the landless to their feudal overlords, Mohmand offers a more nuanced story where the power of landed gentry is circumscribed in ways that have opened up new spaces for strategic political engagement for the poor. Even in regions where the landed gentry has historically enjoyed a greater controlling influence, zamindars cannot take their power for granted and increasingly need to negotiate and engage with their voters. Nevertheless, structural inequality defined by historically unequal patterns of land ownership continues to be a persistent feature of rural politics even in central Punjab. Persistence is thus an important part of Mohmand's story. In fact, as political scientist Hassan Javaid has argued, even the differential prospects for political competition in *Colony* and *Crown* villages are shaped by historical legacy. This brings me to a larger point about the conceptual contribution of this project which, in my opinion, lies in explaining political change in the midst of continuity (or, alternatively, continuity in the midst of change). Analysis in this book clearly demonstrates that, even if political

competition has allowed the poor to participate in horizontal political engagement, the surrounding institutional environment is strongly conditioned by colonial legacy. Political competition still revolves around individuals and candidates drawn from the *zamindar* class who can make promises of access to state patronage to clients.

Thus viewed, the book offers a story of how different forms of political engagement of the poor can take root within larger structures of continuity. Although Mohmand does not conceptualise it as such, her analysis connects with mainstream political economy scholarship on institutional persistence that shows how weak institutions inherited from colonial rule tend to persist over time. As Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson have argued, such path dependence or stickiness in institutions often co-exists with substantial institutional change. The challenge then is to explain institutional continuity in the midst of observable patterns of change. Furthermore, while path dependent structures are a ubiquitous feature of societies the mechanisms of persistence are more difficult to identify and document. Mohmand's analysis makes a modest contribution on both accounts. Her field insights support the argument that despite the churning of elites, the surrounding institutional environment has persisted. As a result, individuals or groups replacing the old elites can play according to the same rules of the game thereby reinforcing the old institutional order.

An important analytical device in Acemoglu and Robinson's framework is the distinction between *de jure* and *de facto* political power, which helps to explain why institutional change and continuity tend to co-exist (Acemoglu and Robinson 2006). Even if there are re-allocations of *de jure* power that change the identity of elites, the *de facto* power often remains unchanged. Mohmand's analysis effectively shows that *de jure* power allocated by political institutions can itself be an important mechanism of persistence. Mohmand shows that while landlords have lost "absolute dominance" in central Punjab they retain significant local authority and control thanks to their increased involvement and investment in politics" (p. 114). It is by controlling the political turf that such elites are able to control the state apparatus, such as police (*thana*) and courts (*katchery*), and mediate access to public services. Such monopoly of mediation between voters and the state ensures their continued relevance. Thus, investment in politics helps to substitute for their loss of landed power. This is a hugely important observation.

Another interesting slant on this issue is that the impact of historic institutions can remain latent for some time before it is re-activated or reinforced. Mohmand's analysis clearly shows that after a brief dislocation in the power of landed aristocracy following the rise of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto large landlords began to regain control in 1977, as the results for that year's elections reveal. With General Zia-ul-Haq banning political parties, depoliticising rural areas, and entrenching clientelism, the old colonial mode of indirect rule was given a new lease of life. It is thus relevant to ask whether the rich

empirical material presented in the book corroborates the idea of “time-varying persistence”, which posits that the impact of historical legacies can remain latent for some time before being re-activated later into the temporal sequence. As political scientist Vicky Fouka convincingly argues, such “time-varying persistence” can often be engineered by political elites” (Fouka 2020).

In terms of appreciating the theoretical significance of this work, it can also be useful to situate Mohmand’s argument within the two dominant modes of institutional analysis for studying “non-democratic politics” (Sonin, Gehlbach, and Svobik 2016). The first approach is to consider the “equilibrium consequences of institutions”. Essentially, this means taking institutions as given and examining how incentives created by these institutions shape the behaviour of participants. The second approach is to study “institutions as equilibria” whereby the emergence and persistence of institutions are treated as equilibrium outcomes of strategic interaction, which creates greater room for human agency. To some extent, we can see both elements at play in Mohmand’s work. Despite such relevance, the book makes an insufficient effort at connecting its rich empirical material with mainstream scholarship on the study of institutions.

External validity and under-specified dimensions

A routine concern for all good empirical work is that of external validity—essentially the extent to which the findings that emerge from the Sargodha context are applicable to other regions of Punjab and, indeed, other provinces in Pakistan. This is an especially important concern given that a key source of variation, the initial differences in property rights arrangement between “Colony” and “Crown” villages, does not exist for other regions of Punjab. Furthermore, the broader question that this book seeks to address—why do the poor participate in politics under conditions of structural inequality—is relevant for understanding rural politics in Pakistan. While Mohmand exploits variation from different villages of Sargodha, her analysis probably captures only in broad strokes the dynamics of rural politics in central Punjab. Punjab’s political and economic geography displays considerable variation. Some districts of central Punjab, for example, in terms of their socio-economic development resemble the districts of south or west Punjab. There is also significant variation in agro-climatic conditions, which has a strong bearing on political and economic structures of Barani, Abi, and Sailabi areas—regional classifications that were historically defined for land revenue purposes based on the underlying water access regime. Nevertheless, I do not consider this as a major limitation since empirically careful work requires a geographic focus. If anything, Mohmand’s project is a call for action for future researchers to extend the scope of this enquiry to other parts of Pakistan. And, in doing so, researchers might discover the continued utility of her basic analytical frame that rests on the salience of village-level vote blocs.

The book raises other important issues that need careful

empirical scrutiny. Firstly, the role of political parties remains somewhat underspecified in this study especially in relation to the functioning of vote blocs. How do village leaders who control vote blocs engage with election candidates and political parties? How does this bear on the process of candidate selection, and are there any points of tension between vote brokers and political parties? While the book offers some perspectives on these, it would have been useful to see a more structured discussion of the role of political parties. A second issue relates to the stability of vote banks. Mohmand’s analysis assumes a certain homogeneity of political preferences within the household, which is a very strong assumption to make in light of growing access to media and higher education, changing demographics, and growth of the rural middle class since the early 2000s. This has been aided, in part, by the growing salience of remittances that might be associated with the reduction of “dependency voting” (Akhtar 2018). Several instances have been highlighted in recent years where members of the same household voted for different political parties with the young and female members of the household making different electoral choices than relatively older members of the household. Opening the black box of household voting would introduce important sources of variation that might have implications for both the ability of village-level leaders to control vote blocs and the nature of strategic bargaining that takes place over voting.

Finally, religious association could serve as a cross-cutting influence across several vote blocs in the same or multiple districts. In rural Punjab shrine-based religious authority can be an important influence on voting patterns. For example, in Sargodha district the caretakers of Sial Sharif and Bhera Sharif enjoy substantial vote banks across different constituencies. In my own work on the political economy of shrines with economist Rinchan Mirza (Malik and Mirza 2018) and political scientist Tahir Malik (Malik and Malik 2017), I have emphasised the mutual dialectic of power between shrine guardians and political parties. While the latter are beginning to assert greater bargaining power vis-à-vis shrine guardians in central Punjab, the electoral influence of shrine elites cannot be assumed away, especially in a milieu where major shrines are still either indirectly or directly relevant for constituents, political parties, and the state.

Future of democratic politics

Besides its academic contribution, analysis in this book has direct relevance for broader debates on the future of democracy in Pakistan. In a country that has cycled between military dictators and weak civilian governments, there are strong vested interests in promoting narratives that demonise politics. It is easy for supporters of authoritarian rule to discredit both politics and politicians in a milieu where structural inequality, clientelism, and dynastic politics are rife. Mohmand’s intellectual intervention provides a ray of hope in this gloomy terrain and shows that competitive electoral democracy can still empower the poor by opening a space to negotiate and strategically bargain with leaders of vote blocs.

Thus, despite all the constraints within which Pakistani democracy functions, there is a high premium on democratic continuity. Regular, competitive multiparty elections can help to sustain and increase the strategic political space for the poor.

Yet analysis in this book also reminds us of the unfinished areas for political reform. Foremost amongst these is the imperfect or weak penetration of political parties in several rural areas of Punjab, especially in western and southern parts of Punjab where well-entrenched families have long monopolized brokerage for political parties in ways that restrict wider grass-roots mobilisation. It was only during the brief interlude in the 1970s that the Pakistan Peoples Party under the leadership of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto mobilised the poor around class-based interests. Since the 1985 local bodies elections held under General Zia-ul-Haq, patronage politics around clans and *biraderis* has assumed greater salience. So far, mainstream political parties seem to be playing by the same rules. They have also been uninterested in a genuine political and fiscal devolution of power that can increase the scale of electoral contestation by easing the entry of new political actors (Mufti, Shafqat, and Siddiqui 2020).

Another unresolved issue is the so-called land question. The historically embedded power of the landed aristocracy compromises Pakistan's long-run democratic prospects. The former Chief Minister of Punjab, Mohammad Hanif Ramay and one of the few middle-class professionals to have been elevated to this position, once famously remarked that the poor quality of Pakistan's democratic process is ultimately consistent with the inequities that characterise its underlying socio-economic structure. He believed that without addressing structural inequalities genuine democratisation would only remain a pipe dream (Ramay 2010). Admittedly, with the fragmentation of landholdings, the emergence of alternative sources of economic power and the growing salience of middle-range landowners in the changing "articulation of political power", the landed aristocracy is no longer as powerful as it used to be (Jan 2019). Available evidence suggests that, compared to the 1960s, there are fewer farms over 100 acres in area (Mahmood 1990). However, the underlying census data often corresponds to individual rather than family holdings and it is the latter that carries more weight for political power. Furthermore, even if the size of individual landholdings has shrunk, land inequality and pervasive landlessness remain defining features of rural areas. Although large landowners control only 10 per cent of total farms, they own 48 per cent of the total farm area and usually have better access to water and means of irrigation. Data on agricultural landholdings is, however, notoriously unreliable.

Notwithstanding this, political economist Ali Jan has correctly argued that "a decrease in landholdings may not necessarily mean a concomitant decline" in the power of landlords (Jan 2019: 179). As the self-declaration of agricultural assets by parliamentarians shows, elected politicians that represent rural areas continue to enjoy substantial land holdings. Mohmand shows that, despite the waning power of landlords in central

Punjab, structural inequality remains a persistent concern in a political milieu where an overwhelming majority of politicians representing rural areas self-classify themselves as agriculturists and the rural poor are often categorised as landless. As she notes:

...the authority and political power of the landlord has continued in some form, as has structural inequality. This is because of a lack of accompanying institutional reforms to deal with the structural basis of this inequality—the effective redistribution of land or access to land markets that could reduce the initial unequal conditions, as well as access to sufficient levels of public goods, such as education and healthcare, by the larger village population that would allow greater economic and social mobility. In the absence of structural reforms and a general underinvestment in public services, rural change has largely consisted of land fragmentation, a reduction in tenancy and the greater availability of non-farm jobs in rural districts—changes that have not been enough to reduce the power of Sahiwal's old landed elite" (p. 119)

In related work, Mohmand emphasises the continued political dominance of colonial proprietary elites in Sargodha district. The empirical analysis in Cheema, Mohmand, and Patnam (2009) highlights that "where village land markets are inert and there is substantial continuity in land ownership initial differences among families in political and economic power have a long-term effect on political dominance." Specifically, Cheema et al. demonstrate that the "probability that an agent exercises political dominance in a particular village, today, is 9% higher if the agent has descended from the proprietary family of that village". Undeniably, there is thus considerable path dependence in terms of both elites and institutional structures inherited from the pre-partition period. Despite the winds of political change sweeping through Punjab's electoral landscape and documented by many competent scholars, several prominent agricultural tribes recognised by the Land Alienation Act of 1900 are still politically relevant in numerous rural constituencies of Punjab. All of this means that the jury is still out on the extent of relative decline in the size of holdings, the precise nature of rural land inequality, and the consequent weight of land as a source of political power.

The need for some form of land reform, whether direct or indirect, is therefore *still* open to debate. Unfortunately, since the 1980s, the land question has receded from both political and intellectual imagination. Mainstream religious leadership has long opposed the idea of redistributive land reforms on the grounds that it violates the sanctity of property rights espoused by Islam (Malik 2020). This view received a legal sanction after the Shariat Appellate Bench of the Supreme Court declared land reforms in Pakistan as un-Islamic in 1989. Lately, many progressive left-leaning scholars and activists have similarly written off the prospect of land reforms. Curiously, this brings conservative religious scholars and progressive intellectuals on the same page at least on the perceived impossibility of land reform.

Concluding remarks

Crafty Oligarchs, Savvy Voters is a seminal contribution to the study of rural politics of Pakistan and offers one of the first rigorous social science attempts at unpacking the relationship between land and politics. Bridging the disciplinary divide separating political scientists, economists, and sociologists, this book represents both an original and monumental contribution that will set the yardstick against which future scholarship on this subject will be judged. While the argument in this book is derived from exploring historical and contemporary variation in only one district of central Punjab, it has nicely prepared the stage for future scholars to identify and exploit similar patterns of variation in southern and western districts of Punjab. I hope that young scholars in Pakistani universities will extend and develop this work in ways that further enriches the discourse.

Mohmand's work also brings some reflected glory to an expanding research cluster on political economy that Professor Ali Cheema of the Lahore University of Management Sciences has directed over the last two decades and with which Shandana Mohmand, the author of this study, has been affiliated. Professor Cheema and his associates have trained and inspired a new generation of scholars who are, at once, grounded in global scholarly literatures and deeply engaged with the local context. This gives one great hope for the future of political economy research on Pakistan.

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