

Book Review

Naqvi, Ijlal. *Access to Power: Electricity and the Infrastructural State in Pakistan*. 192pp. Oxford University Press 2022.

Dr Juvaria Jafri¹

¹ Lecturer in International Relations, University of East Anglia

E-mail: j.jafri@uea.ac.uk

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A core premise of Ijlal Naqvi's *Access to Power: Electricity and the Infrastructural State in Pakistan* is that electricity shortages in the country are a compelling reflection of state capacity. This issue is manifested through recurrent, prolonged, and economically crippling power outages or 'loadshedding' (2) across urban Pakistan, and several previous analyses of the issue are fixated on the question of why Pakistan does not have enough electricity. For example, multilateral agencies, including the IMF through its programmes in Pakistan, have sought to implement comprehensive energy sector reforms centred on measures to improve efficiency, reduce electricity theft and transmission losses, enhance the financial health of energy-related institutions, promote renewable sources, rationalise subsidies and so on.

The author departs from this earlier type of analysis, noting early in the book, in Chapter 1, that approaches which are preoccupied with formal rules of governance have lost traction in development thought. Strategies for reform in countries like Pakistan court failure when they overlook informal institutions. The author argues that the governance of electricity, through formal and informal institutions, evinces relations of power at various levels: national, city, and individual. As such the book, organised into three sections, augments scholarship on state capacity, particularly in a South Asian context where it is uneven and shaped by power and patronage. The author's approach is guided by the work of Michael Mann on the infrastructural state (1984; 1986); a project to understand how the state forms capacities, uneven in various places, to exert its authority and implement policies across its territory. The book

thus sets out to discuss how the uneven capacity of the Pakistani state is captured in the various ways in which its citizens are granted — and very regularly, not granted — access to electricity.

The first section of the book addresses questions of electricity governance at the national level. Power shortages in Pakistan are the outcome of various unresolved issues that pertain not only to power generation but also to distribution. A huge percentage of electricity — close to 20 per cent in 2020, and often higher in previous years — is lost during transmission and distribution, including through theft. This means that for most of Pakistan's history, consumers were not billed for about a quarter of all electricity supplied. The political salience of this is conveyed in the unevenness of losses. As the author observes:

Non-Punjabi electricity consumption is both subsidised and the site of higher losses, but power generation facilities have also been built out in such a manner that reflects the uneven incorporation of the non-Punjabi provinces into the state. The grand bargain that mitigates conflict in the interprovincial political economy of the power sector is one that preserves the ideological commitments of a unitary state at the expense of excessive burdens on the federal exchequer (26).

The most recognisable face of these burdens is the issue of circular debt, the cash flow problem that underpins loadshedding. Because electricity generation costs

exceed distribution revenues, the central government must pay to fill this gap. Loadshedding then becomes a strategy to reduce financial commitments by culling supply. Circular debt is a profound conundrum of Pakistan's macroeconomy and is rooted in decisions about fuel mix, but also in the volatility and financial architecture of international fuel markets over which policymakers have no control. The IMF has been unwavering in its claim that all of this can be resolved through price rises and subsidy cuts and has recently, to a considerable extent, had its way. But generally, such recommendations have met vociferous resistance because they induce cost of living crises. An overlapping issue here is the challenge of expanding power generation based on domestic resources. Initiatives to build dams and extract natural gases in the smaller — non-Punjabi — provinces highlight the tensions that exist between the federal centre and peripheral regions.

Notwithstanding these tensions, power generation in 2020 had grown to the point where the system had excess capacity. The book's third chapter is essentially a case study of governance failures, exemplified through Pakistan's donor-funded energy sector reforms involving the World Bank, USAID, and later the CPEC. Centred on a 1994 policy for the establishment of sixteen independent power producers or IPPs, the strategy sought to build power generation capacity by attracting private investors through sovereign guarantees from the Government of Pakistan. The author concludes the section by noting the reforms replicate past failures because of a systematic disembedding of development practice from development policy. In Karl Polanyi's framework markets are 'embedded' when they are enmeshed in non-economic institutions. Failures in the governance of IPPs are described by the author using this lens to demonstrate the gap between policy design and implementation; this exists because policymakers lack an understanding of the non-economic or social institutions that are fundamental for implementation. The implication of this is that even with sufficient capacity, the problem of loadshedding remained — and remains — unresolved.

Sections II and III are primarily ethnographic but begin with a statistical analysis chapter on distributional losses in Lahore. The author's fieldwork is based on the time he spent in Lahore and Islamabad, conducting interviews at the offices of LESCO and IESCO respectively. The statistical chapter precedes the fieldwork chapters to reiterate a core theme of the book; that access to electricity is uneven in addition to being limited. The author uses an Ordinary Least Squares regression to explore the drivers of losses, observing that the characteristics of feeder consumption appear to drive losses. This approach comes across as unnecessarily

pedantic, particularly for the non-specialist reader. An alternative method would have been welcome, perhaps based on simple descriptive analysis or spatial data to make a similar point: that lower levels of state bureaucracy have more influence on how losses are distributed. This is a basis for deploying ethnographic tools to probe how such patterns are not random but a facet of inequality by design.

The author's interviews are shared as vignettes over most of the remainder of the book. Chapter 5 recounts the travails of the residents of a primarily Christian *katchi abadi* in restoring and retaining an electricity connection. A mobilisation based on collective solidarity and moral arguments is eventually fruitful, and the community of several hundred households is given a communal electricity meter by IESCO on the condition that a committee will informally manage billing and payments, deliver receipts, keep records, and maintain the electricity system. This is not an uncommon arrangement in Islamabad's *katchi abadi* neighborhoods, which are 34 in number, but some committees are more scrupulous than others. Chapter 6 describes the informal compromises made by IESCO employees. These arise from ineffective internal administration measures and often result in dangerous working conditions because of a lack of resources. Chapter 7 narrates how despite formal rules, service delivery is sustained by informal channels. This is depicted through the author's engagement with IESCO employees, including engineers and line superintendents, who regularly deal with customer requests. The author's portrayal of how services are availed will be familiar to anyone who has lived in Pakistan:

Electricity consumers in Islamabad secure service delivery by showing up in person, by paying IESCO employees for their assistance with improper and proper work, by enforcing their will, and by subverting official procedures or even fighting for what they want. (150)

This type of familiarity possibly dampens the ethnographic sections. The overwhelming majority of Pakistanis, and perhaps other South Asians too, will see limited novelty in the informal practices, particularly monetary transactions, that are entailed by service delivery. The author presumably tries to overcome this by emphasising generalisability and linking the vignettes to related scholarship, particularly from India. For example, Giriharadas (134) on interpersonal power in Mumbai, 'Am I his sahib or is he mine?'; and Wade (140) on the blurred line in South India between taking gifts and corruption. Rigorous ethnographic work, as is

certainly the case in this book, produces invaluable qualitative data and this has been utilised here to illuminate the nature of Pakistani state capacity at a granular level. But this might have been presented in a more compelling way, to show how the governance failures and tensions described in earlier sections play out in the day-to-day activities of IESCO staff. To an extent, this is a matter of readability and style, but there is a sense of an abrupt shift in research focus. Whereas the initial focus of the book is on the persistence of loadshedding, the later chapters emphasise the various tensions between an IESCO that ‘‘works’ but also doesn’t ‘work’. This could have been overcome by a more bold, explicit focus on governance reforms and institutional change, given that this theme is a consistent one throughout the book. On a related note, a sharper focus might also have allowed for more persuasive commentary on the important issues of geopolitics and CPEC in the concluding section. In the final part of the book, observations on Saudi influence, sectarian tensions, instability in Afghanistan, and the hollowness of CPEC, etc. — mostly on the same page (160) — come across as undercooked and superfluous. Such weighty themes, rather than being mentioned almost in passing, should either be fleshed out or assigned to a future project.

These are small issues; overall, the book is a rich resource that offers valuable insights to anyone seeking familiarity with the nature of state capacity in the global South. By bringing historical and ethnographic research on Pakistan into dialogue with analytical frameworks used elsewhere in the global South, the author makes a compelling argument for a policy approach that acknowledges the governance compromises that underlie state building. This is an interdisciplinary contribution that will be particularly welcomed by scholars of sociology, political economy, and development studies.
