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Review of *The Army and Democracy: Military Politics in Pakistan* by Aqil Shah

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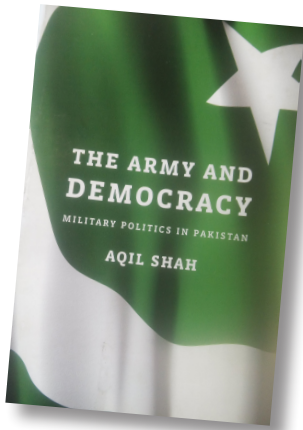
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Book Reviews



The Army and Democracy: Military Politics in Pakistan.

Aqil Shah. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014. 399 pages. ISBN 9780674728936.

Reviewed by Mark F. Briskey

The army remains the foremost power in Pakistan and Aqil Shah's *The Army and Democracy: Military Politics in Pakistan* provides a well-researched work on the origins of how the army became the elite power institution of the state, as well as provides suggested remedies and predictions as to the future role of the army in this nuclear-armed nation.

Shah's early chapters trace the history of the Pakistan army and its early forays into authoritarianism in the first decades after independence, while chapters five, six and seven explain the role of institutional beliefs and motives in shaping the military's behaviour during subsequent moments of transition from and to militarized rule in

military governments. Shah then goes on to assess the increased importance of new centres of power such as the media and judiciary and to assess their impact on how the military exercises its de facto political power and the prospect of real democratic reforms in civil-military relations in Pakistan. His research methods include drawing evidence from archival materials, internal military documents, and over one hundred interviews with Pakistani army officers that included four military service chiefs, three heads of the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISID), politicians, and civil servants.

A central tenet of the book is that it is important to investigate not just how and why, but also when the authoritarian seed was sown in Pakistan. Shah's primary argument is that the military's tutelary beliefs and norms are a legacy of its formative experiences attained under conditions of geopolitical insecurity and extensive nation-building problems. These experiences, he argues, profoundly shaped the army's political interventions and influence by justifying its authoritarian role and expansion into state and society (p. 2). One of the key questions Shah considers is, "Why did Pakistani officers who shared a tradition of apolitical professionalism with their Indian counterparts break it so soon after independence? And why did they develop a political orientation and supplant civilian authorities?" (p. 34).

The army's pivotal role, especially in foreign policy and defence issues, means that it retains a pivotal importance in regional and global security. Relations with neighbours such as India and Afghanistan are often difficult, if not characterised by outright belligerence. Even relations with allies are problematic. For example, U.S. President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson bluntly warned Pakistan in August 2017 to rein in terrorists suspected of being under the control of the military-led Inter-Services Intelligence directorate.

The interference of the military in Pakistan civil society remains as much an issue in 2018 as it did in 2014 when the book was published. Some of the changes the author hoped for in the book are somewhat more evident, with the apparent independence of the judiciary in cases against high level political corruption, such as the dismissal of Nawaz Sharif from office due to the Panama papers scandal in 2017. Equally though, the influence of the military is persistent and the Army remains the de facto arbiter of power. One prominent example is the army's vigorous suppression of independent media that runs contrary to its preferred narrative, as apparent in the 2016 Cyril Almeida affair, though even this is mild to some of the more egregious accusations levelled against the army.

While analysing the evolution of the Pakistan military's persistent praetorianism, Shah does not wholly

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Mark Briskey on *The Army and Democracy: Military Politics in Pakistan*

blame the army. He importantly explains the tumultuous role of the Pakistani political process since 1947 and the international political environment in the evolution of the Army's authoritarian approach. Early on, the army, thriving on its belief that it was the only government institution free of the miasma of political corruption, considered itself as the natural protector of the state from what it saw as the ravenous corruption of the politicians.

Similarly, the army successfully perpetuated their *raison d'être* and security narrative in their successful establishment of India as the hegemon unreconciled to an independent Pakistan. India was successfully cast as the existential enemy, with Pakistani sovereignty resting solely in the hands of the army. Through the early dominance of the army by Ayub Khan, as both Chief of Army and Defence Minister, the military foothold in civil government has never been fully relinquished either during direct periods of rule or as the arbiter of the ostensible periods of democratic governance.

Shah's objective in writing the book was to address a gap in the literature on the Pakistan army and its persistent intervention in politics. Shah argues that there were deficits in previous arguments that had not fully considered the authoritarian attitudes of senior army officers and their justifications for the army installing itself as the guardian of Pakistan. Shah rejects

the army's interpretation of its role as being culture specific and argues that civilian control of democracy is a universally accepted principal of democracy. The arguments Shah makes are important as Pakistan has previously suffered a variety of excuses from military governments as to why the state was not ready for democracy, which included occasional support from highly regarded Western academics. Shah's book is an informed critique of military praetorianism.

An important strength of the book is Shah's wide-ranging access to significant civil and military figures involved in the events that he describes. This infuses the book with the insights and reasonings of the key figures who he interviewed. In doing this, Shah's book builds upon the corpus of work on the Pakistan army and civil-military relations examined to greater and lesser degrees by other leading scholars on Pakistan such as C. Christine Fair, Christophe Jaffrelot, Ayesha Jalal, Hasan-Askari Rizvi, Shuja Nawaz, Hein G. Kiessling, and a number of others.

There could be some criticisms of Shah for not delving too deeply into the role of politicians and some of the truly egregious examples of outright banditry exacted on the nation by the political elite. This is an issue worthy of a thorough examination in its own right, as Shah's argument importantly notes the how the pervasive cry of corruption from the army was used all too frequently to intervene or usurp the democratic process.

This book is ideal for those who wish to understand the evolution of the Pakistani state over the course of seventy years of a democracy frustrated by a military convinced of its predestined mission of protecting the state from its internal and external enemies. It would be a useful addition to both undergraduate and graduate students with interests in Pakistan history, civil-military relations, strategic culture, praetorianism, and the idea of garrison states. A book such as this one would have been ideal upon my first posting to Pakistan and in this regard I would furthermore recommend the book as a valuable reference for diplomats, military, and NGO officials being posted to Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India to understand the provenance and nuances of Pakistan's domestic and external outlook and the powerful role that the army continues to exercise in Pakistan.

Mark F. Briskey is an independent scholar and former senior lecturer in security studies at Curtin University Australia. He undertook postings to South Asia with the Australian Government. He has a PhD from the University of New South Wales (Australian Defence Force Academy) and a Master of Strategic Affairs from the Australian National University.