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

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The Army and Democracy: Military Politics in Pakistan.


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 onto 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 ofapolitical 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
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.

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

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.