



A Primer on Pakistan

A Review of Anton Lieven's Pakistan: A Hard Country

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During the regime of Gen. Pervez Musharraf, it became the policy of the United States to help spread Sufi Islam in Pakistan. A Sufi council was formed and a few seminars and some musical concerts were held; a Sufi University is still being worked on. Meanwhile, Sufi shrines have been attacked all across Pakistan. Many Pakistanis now believe Sufis to be the allies of American intelligence operatives, a belief only strengthened by the recent Raymond Davis affair, in which a Central Intelligence Agency contractor was detained in the killing of two Pakistanis.

The American strategy to target Islamist militants from the skies while helping to establish a tolerant version of Islam on the ground has turned into a bloody joke that nobody laughs at anymore. In his ambitious book, "Pakistan: A Hard Country," Anatol Lieven has a sarcastic comment about the policy on Sufism: "In reality a more helpful strategy in the 'war on terror' might be to use the F.B.I. to support American Methodists against American Pentecostals."

"A Hard Country" is described by its publisher as "a magisterial investigation." The sheer scope of the book is proof of that. With patience and determination, Lieven observes and records all aspects of the curiosity otherwise known as Pakistan — and after more than 500 pages what we

find out is that actually it's not very different from many countries of the past. From climate to religion to ethnic tension, it has everything, only more of it.

Lieven worked as a foreign correspondent in Pakistan during the late 1980s for The Times of London. But unlike so many foreign correspondents who have churned out books from the files of their journalism, he has written a book that is much more than a collection of recycled dispatches interspersed with descriptions of lavish weddings and accounts of the obligatory visits to tribal -areas.

Lieven is in no hurry to reach conclusions; he takes his time so that he can get into the complexities of provincial and caste relationships. He is a writer bent on documenting everything he encounters, pausing long enough to make sense of what he's seeing and hearing and then always remembering to cross-reference other countries and other histories. And he generously quotes people who have tried to cover the same ground before.

Lieven lays bare the well-embedded power structures in the country, devoting separate chapters or sections to Pakistan's provinces, its political parties and, most important, its army. He hangs out with Taliban sympathizers and generals, traces the role of religion and explains the concepts of kinship and honor at play in the country's current travails. Although he's a patient listener, he is not afraid of reaching his own conclusions. Shariah, he discovers, is not so much a strict set of rules as a system for how justice is delivered and who delivers it.

In Lieven's opinion, the West doesn't realize that the problem in Pakistan is not a lack of democracy, but too much of it, with many competing parties and interest groups. When some among Lieven's elite hosts in Peshawar, referring to a rising Taliban leader, wonder who would possibly want to follow a former bus driver, Lieven replies: other bus drivers, of course.

Lieven has a sharp eye not only for class divisions, but also for the tribal and clan loyalties that underpin Pakistani society. Ethnic leaders, generals, industrialists all get a sympathetic hearing, if a skeptical one: Lieven says in his introduction that he has many liberal Pakistani friends but that he always takes their opinions "with several pinches of salt," since those opinions may be devised to satisfy a Western journalist's preconceived notions.

Even so, he occasionally comes across as too understanding of Pakistan's elite. Sometimes he mistakes hospitality for honesty, politeness for efficiency and fluent English as a sign of sincerity. Pakistan's nobility, if they can be bothered to read so sprawling a book, will no doubt be pleased at their portrayal.

By the same token, Lieven's interactions with common Pakistanis tend to be filtered through the outlooks of his influential friends and journalistic contacts, and are infused with the kind of imagined dangers Pakistan's elite feel from their less prosperous countrymen. Once, in Lahore, Lieven talks to people in the middle of a dozen anarchic cricket matches. They ask him aggressively about why America is doing what it's doing. They also offer him a cold drink. At that moment Lieven pictures himself in the tribal areas, imagining that he has been decapitated and

his head used as a ball. If you spend enough time with Pakistan's military and civilian elite, you catch some of their paranoia, and start seeing yourself drowning in rivers of blood.

Fortunately, Lieven always seems to pull himself back. He is too committed a journalist to let any imagined fears overwhelm what is in the end a sweeping and insightful narrative.

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