

## BOOK REVIEWS

# Pakistan

## *A Modern History*

By Ian Talbot

NEW YORK: ST. MARTIN'S PRESS, 1998  
374 PAGES + APPENDICES, BIBLIOGRAPHY, AND INDEX

Scholarly and well-researched are not always the equivalent of accessible. Unfortunately, this is the case concerning Ian Talbot's *Pakistan: A Modern History*. The author's erudition is displayed on every page. He places Pakistani history in various contexts: the legacy of the British Raj; the history and role of Islam in society; the historical importance of different languages to the citizens of the country; the various social and economic constructs of the populace; the issue of Kashmir; the war in Afghanistan. His knowledge of the country is encyclopedic. Virtually every page of his book contains several footnotes. Yet, because of the complexity of the subject, the sheer density of the text overwhelms the reader.

Talbot is particularly good at analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of the individual leaders and political movements. He delineates the differences between Ayub Khan, Yahya Khan and Zia ul-Haq to demonstrate that not all of Pakistan's authoritarian military leaders were alike. He explains the flaws inherent in Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's rise to power that led to his overthrow; the unrealistic

expectations which Bhutto's daughter Benazir was unable to fulfill. He examines populism, nationalism and religious fundamentalism, none of which has been able to satisfy the need of the citizens for long.

Also, Talbot's grasp of the complexity of religious belief is clearly displayed. The mixture of Sunni, Shiite, and Sufi adherents and small sects, like the persecuted Ahmadis, which make up the country's Moslem population, are not monolithic in their beliefs. In addition, the level of commitment to Islam varies from the superstitious villagers to the sophisticated, highly educated residents of the big cities. Imposition of Islamic law on the country has not united the population any more than the imposition of the Urdu language was universally popular. Even after the secession of East Bengal in 1971, neither Islam nor Urdu has been sufficient as a national rallying cry.

Because Talbot believes in the resilience of the people of Pakistan, his despair over the opportunism and corruption of so many of those in power is not total. He concludes that conventional wisdom which views the country being ruled by America, Allah and the Army is simplistic. His hope is that consensus, consent, commitment, conviction, and compassion will eventually win out. The book was concluded before Pakistan's most recent military coup that replaced the democratically-elected government of Nawaz Sharif.

As informative and even-handed as this history is, the book is useful only to a knowledgeable and highly sophisticated reader. It suffers in a number of areas. First and most important, there are no maps at all in the book. It is impossible for a neophyte to the study of South Asian history to know where events occurred. Whether it is the description of the mass migration of Hindus and Moslems during the 1948 partition, a discussion of the tribal differences in the numerous regions and provinces in West Pakistan, the loss of East Bengal, an examination of the Kashmiri question, or an explanation of the country's border difficulties, readers need maps. Second, the bewildering numbers of political parties are referred to by their acronyms. It is true that one of the appendices in the back of the book is a list of political parties and organizations with their histories and acronyms. However, if a reader were to be flipping to this appendix each time an acronym appeared, reading the book would take at least twice as long. Third, the recitation of facts is numbing. In an effort to be inclusive, the author has drowned his readers in a sea of information. For all of these reasons, *Pakistan: A Modern History* is inappropriate for classroom use, except at the graduate level. However, with its wealth of factual information and excellent appendices including one with biographies of all the major figures in Pakistani history, the text should be useful as a reference for any instructor who wished to familiarize him or herself concerning this relatively unstudied country in South Asia. ■

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