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Pakistan*

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# *Nicolas Martin, Politics, Landlords and Islam in Pakistan*

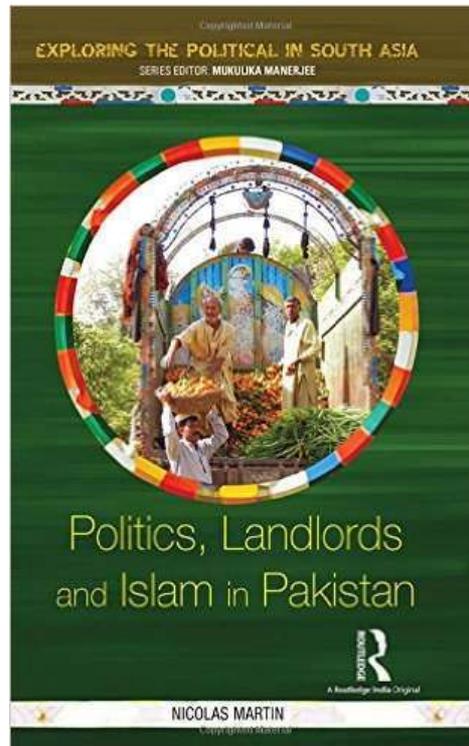
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Martin, Nicolas (2016) *Politics, Landlords and Islam in Pakistan*, Abingdon: Routledge  
(Exploring the Political in South Asia), 192 pages.

- 1 In his account of landlords and their politics in rural Pakistan (focusing on central Punjab), Nicolas Martin offers a wealth of ethnographic detail. From the homesickness of indentured child servants to clever forms of vote-rigging in local elections as well as notions of spiritual superiority mixed with social critique amongst the impoverished adepts of Sufi Islam, Martin brings fine-grained forms of analysis to bear on several familiar themes in the study of rural Pakistan. Readers will immediately appreciate Martin's account of landlords who succeeded in reproducing their economic power even after the Green Revolution (when mechanisation increased rural unemployment and transformed countless tenants into raw units of labour). Those familiar with politics in rural Pakistan will also recognise his account of powerful agnatic kinship factions as key actors in the context of local elections.



And, of course, few will struggle to grasp his account of the political influence exerted by the landowning descendants of various Sufi saints. Like so many village-level studies of the past—Zekiye Eglar (1960), Saghir Ahmad (1977), Alain Lefebvre (1999)—Martin's ethnography is complex and illuminating.

- 2 Analytically, Martin reiterates key findings from my own work (Nelson 2002, 2011) while, at the same time, expanding those findings in new ways. In particular he builds on my critique of Partha Chatterjee's theorisation of subaltern 'political society' as a fresh approach to the conceptualisation of 'democracy' in South Asia (2004, 2011). In Chatterjee's account, the poor wield political influence owing to their large numbers; this influence attracts the attention of elected representatives, who mediate public access to state resources. In fact electoral accountability is associated with informal and largely unpredictable forms of political patronage (as opposed to more explicit forms of statutory intermediation). *Patronage*, Chatterjee argues, *advances* the well-being of the poor.
- 3 Critical of the highly centralised colonial legacy embedded in formal legal (*i.e.* statutory) authority, Chatterjee believes that informal patterns of grassroots political interaction are more responsive to the needs of South Asia's impoverished majority—and, thus, more 'democratic'. To make this point he draws attention to forms of patronage associated with elected representatives who withhold, however inconsistently, the enforcement of existing property laws in order to facilitate (as a matter of political 'morality') the survival of local slum-dwellers. Because Chatterjee divorces electoral accountability from any appreciation for promulgating and amending specific laws, or seeking their consistent enforcement, however, I've argued that his notion of accountability is not 'democratic', but 'despotic' (Nelson 2011). Martin agrees. He highlights, in particular, patterns of economic dependency that shackle Pakistan's rural poor to powerful landowners—landowners who, having captured the state (in a bid to sustain their

economic power), go on to mediate public access to state resources in ways that, however intimate, remain irregular and profoundly disadvantageous for the poor.

- 4 Focusing on a village he calls Bek Sagraana (a pseudonym) in District Sargodha, Martin describes the rise of a middling landowning clan—the Gondals—bound together by close cousin marriages. The Gondals have slowly displaced an aristocratic clan of absentee landlords known as the Makhdooms. Both clans draw on Sufi strains of authority, but in this context the Gondals are depicted as ‘upstarts’. The Makhdooms still own a lot of land, but like other super-elites who spend most of their time in Lahore, Martin notes that the Makhdooms have lost touch with the cut and thrust of local disputes. In fact, precisely insofar as they have failed to make themselves available in the context of those disputes (via forms of patronage involving bureaucrats, police, judges, and various thugs), they have seen their political power decline.
- 5 In the past, Martin explains, the Gondals worked together with one another to battle the Makhdooms. But, as the influence of the Makhdooms has waned, different factions *within* the Gondal clan have begun to compete with one another. Their competition is not confined to control over land. Like the Makhdooms before them, they have begun to diversify: moving their children away from Bek Sagraana they have sought out schools to prepare the next generation for jobs as civil servants, police officials, judges, and (ideally) professional jobs abroad. Within Bek Sagraana, however, each Gondal faction is still surrounded by various subordinate castes, and the first half of Martin’s book is devoted to a detailed account of these ‘proletarianised’ tenants and servants—tenants and servants faced with declining patterns of informal exchange in rural areas (*e.g.* trading services for food) and a relentless increase in stripped-down forms of wage labour.
- 6 Much of the literature detailing the political economy of rural Punjab describes powerful landowning clans calling on local ‘vote banks’, including tenants and servants, to support them in their battles (including their electoral battles) with other clans (Mohmand 2014). Typically, these ‘vote banks’ are described as extended networks of kin who support one another. But there are lingering questions about the mechanisms whereby *unrelated* tenants and servants come to support this or that landowning faction. To answer this question, Martin draws on a secondary body of literature concerning debt bondage. As Martin points out, control over credit (as a routine form of patronage) helps politically ambitious families pursue their goals. In particular, he notes that debts are attached, not to individuals, but to extended kinship groups. Recalling (without citing) some of the path-breaking work undertaken by Anirudh Krishna (2003), he recounts several stories in which families struggle to pool their resources to pay off debts resulting from expensive weddings or medical emergencies. It is not ‘feudal’ loyalties, he notes, but group-based debts that tie ancillary castes and their children—sent to work as servants in exchange for unmet promises of an improved education—to the ‘patronage’ of political rivals. Indeed, departing from Martin’s own account of the ‘proletarianisation’ of rural tenants and servants, it is this reinforcement of *kinship* ties (via debt) that often frustrates the emergence of *class*-based economic and political solidarities.
- 7 Beyond his account of debt bondage, however, Martin also describes the complex *political* rivalries that preoccupy different Gondal factions. This is political ethnography at its best. Closely reflecting the work of scholars like Mohammad Azam Chaudhury (1999), Martin describes a raft of political machinations that extend from fabricating criminal cases (requiring one’s gunman to shoot himself in the arm to frame an enemy) to implicating one’s rivals in elaborate cattle-thieving manoeuvres. Within these stories,

Martin seeks to correct what he sees as an over-emphasis on ‘competing biraderis’ in the academic literature on political competition in rural Punjab. Instead, following Frederik Barth’s famous work on Pashtun politics during the 1950s, he draws our attention away from ‘competing biraderis’ to the agnatic rivalries unfolding *within* biraderis (in this case, rival Gondal cousins) instead.

- 8 This is not a new argument. It is, however, an argument greatly facilitated by Martin’s decision to conduct fieldwork in a village where the rival Makhdoom biraderi had already faded from the political limelight, creating in effect a single-dominant-biraderi village. Here, rivalries unfolding *within* the Gondal biraderi come into sharp relief, allowing Martin to highlight the ways in which one faction of Gondal cousins solicits support from powerful *non*-Gondals in a bid to defeat its close Gondal rivals. This observation is not enough to support Martin’s overarching claim that ‘biraderi-based’ factions no longer provide a key point of political loyalty in the Punjab. It does, however, help to highlight the fact that, in villages like Bek Sagrana, factions *within* biraderis are at least as important as the rivalries between them.
- 9 Martin insists that his argument regarding the reproduction of economic and political dominance among landowning kinship factions—factions that use elections to compete for access to state power (so that, if they succeed, they are in a position to distribute access to state resources or impunity as a form of patronage)—is *not* a strong-society/weak-state argument like the one associated with Joel Migdal (1988) or my work on landed kinship factions and state capture in Lahore, Sialkot, and Sargodha (2002, 2011). This is odd. It is odd because so much of Martin’s narrative points to exactly this sort of state-society linkage. As Martin points out, electoral competition in Bek Sagrana does not involve a competition to advance the well-being of ordinary voters; instead, the primary goal lies in patronising dependent voters with debt in a push to consolidate the ‘vote banks’ that might allow one to defeat one’s agnatic rivals en route to a successful push for state capture. Indeed, Martin reminds us that state capture is essential for those seeking to reinforce their economic and political power—not only in terms of informal patronage targeting the poor (*e.g.* drawing on the police to threaten the families of absconding debtors), but also in terms of extending forms of impunity to related landowners who perform explicitly illegal acts (*e.g.* debt bondage itself, the manipulation of land revenue records to formalise violent land seizures post hoc, or the creation of public-sector ‘ghost’ jobs in which the public purse covers the cost of ‘teachers’ who actually work as family servants). Again and again, Martin illustrates the link between strong social ties (*e.g.* agnatic kinship factions) and the capture of state power via elections or specific efforts to place well-educated relatives in the civil service, the police, or the judiciary. It is odd that he shies away from showing how his work reinforces that which came before.
- 10 Within the Gondal clan, Martin beautifully narrates the rise of one faction over another owing to its affiliation with the regime of General Pervez Musharraf and the political party he established—namely, the ‘Quaid-e-Azam’ faction of the Pakistan Muslim League or PML-Q. During the period of his fieldwork (2004–2006), Martin notes that landlord factions with ties to the PML-Q fared well, even as their rivals were harassed. (One key Gondal rival who did not defect from the ‘main’ Pakistan Muslim League to Musharraf’s PML-Q spent several months in jail.) Given the timing of his fieldwork, it is easy to understand why Martin felt that military rule played such a central role in reinforcing divisions within established landowning kinship factions (at the expense of any alternative economic and political formation that might have favoured the rural poor).

However, several closely related patterns surrounding the political rivalries of agnatic kinship factions were also present during the *non*-military regimes of the 1990s—a fact that raises several questions regarding Martin’s assertion that the Pakistan Army played *the* pivotal role in sustaining the political and economic landscape he describes.

- 11 Following Ayesha Jalal (1990), Martin notes that, throughout Pakistan’s history, military rulers sought to bypass existing political parties via non-party ‘local body’ or ‘union council’ elections. (Ayub Khan sought to marginalise the Pakistan Muslim League; Zia-ul-Haq targeted the Pakistan People’s Party.) In fact Martin notes that each of Pakistan’s military and civilian regimes—from the Pakistan Muslim League to General Ayub Khan to the Pakistan People’s Party to Generals Zia-ul-Haq and Pervez Musharraf—has kow-towed to exactly the same landowning kinship factions at the local level, *notwithstanding* (a) Muslim League efforts to move beyond the kinship-based rural order supported by the (colonial-era) Punjab Unionist Party, (b) Green Revolution reforms that enhanced the position of ‘middling’ farmers as opposed to large landowners, (c) early Pakistan People’s Party rhetoric mobilising ‘commodified’ tenants and labourers against ‘feudal’ landowners, and (d) General Zia-ul-Haq’s effort to shift Pakistan’s political centre of gravity from rural clans to urban ‘Islamism’, and so on. Indeed, Martin is correct when he notes that the agnatic rivalries unfolding within the Gondal clan are typical of a political order long dominated by landowning kinship factions during periods of colonial, military, and civilian rule. But, having said this, Martin goes on to assert that this order persists because, more than anything else, it is the *Pakistan Army* that has prevented a viable alternative from emerging. He does not acknowledge the degree to which civilian parties actually *mirrored* the work of the military’s PML-Q. (My own fieldwork, undertaken during the 1990s, suggests that civilian patterns did exactly this.) In short, Martin does not appear to support one of his key arguments—namely, that the Pakistan Army is responsible for the persistence of Pakistan’s rural economic and political order—with the same level of ethnographic detail found in the rest of his book. This is disappointing.
- 12 Overall, Martin has written a beautifully detailed ethnographic account of rural politics in Sargodha. Even beyond his lucid recapitulation of my earlier work criticising Partha Chatterjee—specifically, Chatterjee’s sense that electoral politics underpinning arbitrary forms of state patronage *advance* (rather than *undermine*) the well-being of the poor—Martin advances our understanding of rural politics in at least three ways. First, he extends our understanding of the kinship ties underpinning Pakistan’s political economy beyond a familiar account of landowning brotherhoods, drawing our attention to the role that kinship plays in restricting class-based solidarities amongst *indebted rural labourers* as well. Second, he reinforces our understanding of the electoral battles through which landowning brotherhoods compete for dominance at every level—not merely as a matter of competition *between* brotherhoods but also *within* them. And, finally, albeit less successfully in terms of fine-grained ethnographic evidence, he urges us to stress the role that the *Pakistan Army* has played in sustaining a political landscape dominated by landowning kinship factions (as opposed to programmatic or even ideologically progressive political parties) over time. This is an interesting book. It deserves a wide readership.

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