



Social and Education History

E-ISSN: 2014-3567

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Hipatia Press

España

Anwar Farooq, Muhammad
The State of Islam: Culture and Cold War Politics in Pakistan
Social and Education History, vol. 6, núm. 3, octubre, 2017, pp. 341-345
Hipatia Press
Barcelona, España

Available in: <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=317053219005>

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The State of Islam: Culture and Cold War Politics in Pakistan

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1) The Islamia University of Bahawalpur (Pakistan)

Date of publication: October 23rd, 2017

Edition period: Edition period: October 2017-February 2018

To cite this article: Farooq, M.A. (2017). The State of Islam: Culture and Cold War Politics in Pakistan [Review of the book]. *Social and Education History* 6(3), 342-345. doi: 10.17583/hse.2017.2485

To link this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/hse.2017.2485>

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Reviews (I)

Saadia, T. (2014). *The State of Islam: Culture and Cold War Politics in Pakistan Karachi*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

The content of a book is always a reflection of mind of the author about an issue but on the other hand it also provides a candid story of topic under discussion. The complexity in the genetic makeup of Pakistan is undeniable in all respects like religious, political, cultural and social. But the causes of such complexity are still vague and modern scholarship on Pakistan Studies is just about to identify and explore the relationship between religious, political, cultural and social variables. Many scholars tried to explore such relationship and the outcomes of the process appeared as a cloud of opinions on the same issue. ‘The State of Islam’ by Saadia Toor is an idiosyncratic scholarship which has underscored the importance of cultural elements in the process of political evolution in Pakistan. She identified that at very beginning the stakeholders in the political development in Pakistan were secular or democratic in nature but the establishment tried to play down their secular and democratic modals of state craft for these were not in compliance with the inclinations of the establishment. The attitude of establishment was always deferential towards anti-communists and pro-Islam staggers. In introductory chapter, the author embellished the evolution of Muslim Nationalism in new paradigm of Indian politics of representation by delineating the dialect between communism and Muslim Nationalism.

After partition, there were two hindrances were observed in development of a national culture in Pakistan. First was simple that majority of Muslims



did not migrate to Pakistan and second was the demand of Bengalis to declare the status of Bangla language as national language like Urdu. Due to such discrepancies, it took too much time in the emergence of national culture in Pakistan. On the other hand, this conflict catalyzed the evolution of political culture in Pakistan. Many political solutions were introduced to fill the cultural gap between east and west Pakistan and one of such solutions was the scheme of One-Unit. It highly ignored the cultural elements and was totally dependent on the religion as binding force between east and west Pakistan. This situation resulted as a tragedy in history of Pakistan. In chapter three the author described the literary politics between nationalist writers and progressive writers. Nationalist stance was to avoid politics in the domain of literature while on the other hand progressive writers were in favour of political literature because they considered it necessary to speak about the problems of people. This debate between two different schools of thought deeply affected Pakistani literature and intellectuals. This phase of history was in favour of those who followed the path of nation-building through literature. Even in Ayub's era many nationalist writers got state level appreciation but the progressives faced difficult time. The author declared the Ayub's era as decade of development. In this chapter, she described that Ayub Khan highly disliked the left oriented activism in the domain of politics and literature. He tried to maintain a strict check and balance for such elements. He established Writers Guild to balance the equation in writer's paradigm. In 1965, Ayub faced accusations from his opponents related to election-rigging and Indo-Pak war. The momentum of political movements against him created a vacuum in political space which was filled by Zulifqar Ali Bhutto and his Pakistan Peoples Party. Bhutto was in favour of Islamic socialism which was considered an attempt to marginalize Islam by rightest schools of thought. The author argued that in cultural paradigm Bhutto utilized the space which was created by the communist poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz. Due to such cultural elements Bhutto became the champion of left in Pakistani politics by getting the favour of masses through his policies and slogans. No doubt, it was a brilliant political move but its impact was reduced after the difficult situation of east Pakistan in 1971.

The author put the responsibility of current state of Pakistan on Zia-ul-Haq in the words; “Every aspect of the Pakistani state, society, politics and culture worth noting today bears the scars of the 11 years of martial law under General Zia ul Haq from 1977 to 1988, Pakistan’s longest and most brutal military dictatorship”. After Bhutto, Zia came to power and tried to attract masses by announcing the program of Islamization in all walks of life. Per author it is still possible to trace the streaks of the Islamization in the cultural and political paradigms of Pakistan. The program of Islamization gave strength to religious parties such that no political activist dare to confront the such religious parties even today. The Author appreciated the efforts of Women’s Action Forum to resist the situation produced in cultural and political paradigm in Zia regime. It was a tough time for all pro modern political activists. The Soviet invasion in Afghanistan and continuity of American aid made Zia-ul-Haq more powerful to increase the span of his regime. After the end of Afghan war Americans stopped the aid. No rehabilitation program was introduced for those who fought in Afghanistan which gradually deteriorated the cultural and political interface of the country. Per the author the incomplete Afghan war venture became the cause of an increase in level of violence in Pakistani society.

The discussion, in last two chapters of the book portrayed the role of Pakistani feminism. She argues that the writers of feminist school of thought, especially female writers were far less accommodating of Islam’s political encroachment upon gendered cultural practice during Zia-ul-Haq’s tenure. In final chapter the author discussed the women rights and successfully identified the impact of Zia regime on women in social and cultural sphere. She mentioned the struggle of the legal activist Asma Jahangir and Hina Jilani for women development and women rights. At the end of the book the author identified the relation of military with Pakistani state and with Pakistani people. Most notably, in last chapter the stance of author was little bit in contradiction with settled cultural and political norms in Pakistan.

No doubt, the book is a finest effort in socio-historical space and has been appreciated by teachers, researchers and scholars. The starting chapters of the book contain sound arguments and provide a well-researched presentation of the complexity involved in relationship of Pakistan culture and politics. This book is worth reading to understand the relationship

between culture and politics in Pakistan and to identify such political mistakes which were committed in the political development in Pakistan. It is necessary to analyze such discrepancies to achieve a less complex future of Pakistan. The State of Islam succeeded quite well, and is recommended reading especially for feminist newcomers to Pakistan's history and politics.

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