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Review of: Resistance and Control in
Pakistan by Akbar S. Ahmed.
Routledge, London.

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Resistance and Control in Pakistan by Akbar S. Ahmed. Routledge, London. 1991

Akbar Ahmed is a prolific author who has recently made a reputation as a liberal interpreter of Islam to the West. This book, however, comes from an earlier phase of his career, and is of more interest to an anthropological audience.

The text focuses on a uprising that occurred prior to and during Dr. Ahmed's watch as Political Agent in South Waziristan in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province during the mid-1970s. Armed with insider's knowledge, Ahmed presents a fascinating account of tribal rivalry between the Wazirs and their more numerous and powerful local cousins, the Mahsuds. Wazir resentment of Mahsud domination led them to support a religious leader who, for a short time, united them in active and bloody resistance.

Noor Muhammad, the Wazir leader, was a Mullah (religious expert) presiding at a major Waziri mosque located strategically in the center of a large informal market. Trained by the famous Pakistani religious scholar and activist, Maulana Mufti Mahmood, Noor Muhammad brought new urban sophistication and Koranic scholarship to his post in the hinterlands, and his Wazir parishioners were pleased to affirm themselves as superior in piety, if not in power, to the Mahsud. Having gained the active support of his congregation, the Mullah was able to tax the market, improve the mosque, and set up religious schools for the sons of Wazir elders.

The Mullah then attempted to convert his economic and symbolic capital into political power, recruiting a private army and actively supporting pro-Wazir policies. His efforts led to strong resistance from the Mahsud, and from the Pakistani administration. However, government response was hindered by internal rivalries at every political level. Ahmed shows a fine awareness here of the complex way tribal, regional and national political actors within and outside the government use the antagonisms of other actors to gain their own ends.

The political impasse allowed the Mullah to mount a jihad against the 'infidel' Mahsud. Threatened by chaos, the Government acted at last, arresting the Mullah and his close allies and burning the market to the ground.

Ahmed's views on these exciting events combine his roles as both administrator and anthropologist; and he argues that there is no contradiction between the two. In fact, he says his anthropological grasp of segmentary lineage principles and local models for action made him a better Political Agent. No shamefaced politically correct worries about the dangers of using anthropology for the benefit of the hegemon are in evidence here, as Ahmed exuberantly cites numerous commendations from his superiors as evidence of his anthropologically derived ability to control the tribesmen.

Ahmed is straightforward in his belief in the ultimate goodness of the state. This leads him both to overestimate the salience of the District as the basic political unit for local action, and to present a too dismal portrait of the Mullah, who is dismissed as a pure charlatan. But the Mullah must have had a hard task in trying to assert sacred authority in one of the most egalitarian social formations in the world. One regrets the absence of any texts from the pulpit or any consideration of comparative sociological material on cults and commitment procedures that would help to explain his success. As it is, we only get a picture of a pious, power-seeking fraud duping his Wazir followers with millennial dreams and magic tricks.

Ahmed is much better, however, in showing the ways the Mullah was debunked by his Mahsud opponents, who claimed the Wazir had lost their honor by submitting to a hypocritical and cowardly philanderer. The cynical Mahsud attitude makes the very worthwhile point that all Muslims are not equally impressed by reformist zeal, and that there is a counter-rhetoric available to deflate the political pretensions of any would-be saviour. This perspective is a valuable corrective to the public images of purity and sanctity relentlessly promoted within Scripturalist Islamic circles and equally relentlessly reported by Western commentators.

As a specialist, I have some quibbles with Ahmed over details. For example, he believes that highland Pukhtun, such as the Wazir and Mahsud, have a more pristine honour-based social world in contrast to hierarchical lowland Pukhtun, such as the Yusufzai, who are supposedly under the thumb of Government. However, Pakistan provides almost all employment and income for the Wazir and Mahsud and exercises huge and direct political power there, as this book illustrates. The supposedly tame lowlands, on the other hand, are relatively free of state intervention, and feuds and affairs of honour consequently occur at far higher rates. In fact, the romantic image of the honour-bound tribesman is better applied to those who are not worth government scrutiny rather

than to those who are in active and symbiotic collusion with the apparatus of the state.

Despite any quibbles, though, this book provides wonderful case material, and will be of great interest to anyone concerned either with the genesis and trajectory of Islamic religious movements or with the ethnography of the Pukhtun. But buyers should beware. This book is a reissue (with an interesting and critical new forward by Francis Robinson) of a 1983 Cambridge Press hardcover grandiosely titled Religion and Politics in Muslim Society. It may be worth purchasing once, but not twice.

875 words

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