



## **Pakistan: A Hard Country**

Reviewed by

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Pakistan has got a sudden great geo strategic importance after the 9/11 attacks. Pakistan has played a vital role in war against terrorism. There have been different negative impressions about Pakistan's role in this war. *Pakistan: A Hard Country*, This insightful, comprehensive portrait of Pakistan is the perfect antidote to stereotypical descriptions of the country as the most dangerous place in the world.

Lieven has known Pakistan for over 20 years, first as the foreign correspondent for *The Times* in the late 1980s, and more recently through five research trips in 2007-09 in his capacity as a professor of War Studies at King's College, London. Thanks to his familiarity with the place and its people, Lieven peppers his analysis of Pakistan with anecdotes, comic observations, and travelogue, thereby favoring the detail and texture of anthropology over the bullet points and binaries of policy.

The author is at his best when unpacking the kinship networks and cultures of patronage that permeate every aspect of Pakistani society. Indeed, the central thesis of the book is that the Pakistani state is far more durable than it seems, owing to extensive kinship networks that make leaders (whether tribal, political, or dictatorial) accountable to and dependent on followers among whom they must distribute patronage to ensure their own survival.

To make his point, Lieven spares readers the familiar chronology of Pakistani history with its cyclical propensity for democracy and dictatorship, and instead divides the book politically, geographically, and institutionally to illustrate how the demands of patronage impact

the functioning of political parties, police stations, tribes, courts, sectarian organizations, religious shrines, and more. We see, for instance, the high-ranking politician who cannot make policy because he's too busy arranging promotions and job opportunities for supporters, or attending the marriages and funerals where extended social networks are maintained Or the *Peer* (hereditary saint) who cultivates a political contact to secure donations for a shrine in exchange for devotees' votes.

Through such examples, Lieven convincingly argues that Pakistan's is a "negotiated state," where institutions and political entities constantly broker their authority in light of the elaborate system of patronage. For example, Lieven's analysis of the justice system in Pakistan -which he identifies as comprising competing legal codes, including the law of the state, Islamic law, and folk (tribal) law - reveals the concessions and compromises that parallel authorities must make to deliver justice. Thus a senior policeman may convene a *jirga* (a council of elders) to settle a dispute in order to preserve the honor of a landowner who would be shamed among his community if tried in a court of law. Such an action, in turn, would secure the policeman's prompt promotion.

Notably, Lieven's emphasis on kinship and patronage does not reduce Pakistanis to a hapless mass victimized by a hierarchical state bureaucracy, military, or tribal system. He instead shows that the importance of kinship loyalty to those in positions of power means that many members of society are able to exploit available patronage (whether in the form of cash, clout, or coveted appointments). This argument explains Pakistan's low inequality rating according to the Gini Co-efficient, since the state's resources are constantly being redistributed through society owing to the demands of the patronage culture. As long as the expectations of this culture are fulfilled, Lieven suggests, revolutionary action (whether Islamist or socialist) seems unlikely.

This argument about Pakistan's ultimate stability is steeped in historical context, yet enlivened with the journalist's ear for the word on the street. Lieven explains the historical precedent for Islamic terrorism in the country's north-western regions as well as sectarian strife in southern Punjab. But he also takes great care to include contemporary Pakistanis' viewpoints on the current implications of these trends. It is to Lieven's credit that he allows Pakistanis to express their own understanding of the nation's predicament through extensive direct quotes. This narrative device helps uncover the logic behind traits that may seem indecipherable - or even suicidal- to the outsider; the barbaric rulings of western-educated tribal chiefs, the apathy of civilian law-enforcers in the face of militant attacks.

The subtlety and fluency with which Lieven deconstructs the quirks of Pakistani society may lead some to write him off as an apologist for the country. Nothing could be further from the truth. When read closely, *Pakistan: A Hard Country* contains dire warnings about Pakistan's future, and is often pessimistic about the prospects for change. Take, for instance, Lieven's analysis of the southern province of Sindh. He correctly points out that *waderos* (hereditary landowners) are causing Sindhi society to stagnate, and therefore become more vulnerable to climate change. Water resources are drying up, but the feudal system keeps the population uneducated, divided along tribal lines, and thus unable to revamp water infrastructure or local agricultural practice.

At the same time, Lieven does not advocate abolishing the *wadero* system, and instead points out those landowners are a crucial barrier against Sindhi nationalism, which could plunge the province into intense ethnic conflict if stirred. In other words, Lieven argues that either drought or violence will lead to provincial collapse. The realization that there are few good options to address some of Pakistan's most pressing issues occurs with unnerving frequency throughout the book.

Where appropriate, however, Lieven makes clear and consistent policy recommendations, primarily directed at the U.S. and Pakistani governments. His resounding message to the Washington is to avoid incursions into Pakistani territory by U.S. ground forces, even in the event of a terrorist attack with Pakistani origins on American soil. Lieven believes that a U.S. military intervention is one of the only factors that can truly destabilize Pakistan by causing a mutiny and subsequent split in the army, a development that could spur an Islamic upheaval and plunge the country into prolonged civil war. Given Lieven's previous writings on the populist and nationalist American response to terrorism, his concerns about Washington miscalculating the fallout of U.S. military actions in Pakistan should be taken quite seriously.

Lieven also confronts the Pakistani government with a challenge: to urgently address the consequences of climate change, particularly imminent and acute water shortages. After all, patronage ceases to be effective in the face of resource scarcity, and kinship loyalties in stressed environments can only lead to violence of the sort that could permanently undermine the Pakistani state.

After reading through the 500 exhaustive pages that comprise *Pakistan: A Hard Country*, few will mistake the specificity of Lieven's policy recommendations for an oversimplification of Pakistan's problems—if anything, the focus on climate change and U.S. intervention demonstrates Lieven's unparalleled ability to keep the threats to Pakistan's stability in perspective.

That said, there are some issues Lieven fails to address. There is surprisingly little on the U.S. drone program in Pakistan's tribal areas, one of the most controversial subjects in the context of strained U.S.-Pakistan relations and a useful piece of the puzzle to explain anti-Americanism in Pakistan. Lieven's discussion of the Pakistani economy is also limited, even though concerns about the destabilizing effect of high inflation coupled with low growth rates are mounting each day. Rather than critique the country's macroeconomic policies, Lieven reiterates his thesis by showing that industrial and business elites do not have kinship networks, and therefore exert little power over the state.

And while Lieven makes educated guesses about the impact of rapid urbanization on Pakistani politics and society, his analysis seems incomplete. According to Lieven, the power of kinship networks will endure in Pakistan's expanding cities as migrants retain their rural links. This analysis runs counter to theories that urbanization will lead to new political and even religious, allegiances. In the absence of raw data, it would have been interesting for Lieven to engage these possibilities and include scenarios for an urbanized Pakistan, or document more Pakistani perspectives on a trend that has yet to become prominent in public discourse.

These, however, are minor omissions in what is otherwise an intuitive, intelligent, and invaluable text. Ultimately, *Pakistan: A Hard Country* has the power to dampen the paranoia about Pakistan's security complex, put terrorism in perspective, and humanize Pakistanis.

***Pakistan: A Hard Country***

***By: Anatol Lieven***