

“The Politics of Common Sense: State, Society and Culture in Pakistan”

A Book Review

By [James M. Dorsey](#)

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Region: [Asia](#)

Theme: [History](#)

In-depth Report: [PAKISTAN](#)

[Aasim Sajjad Akhtar's The Politics of Common Sense: State, Society and Culture in Pakistan](#) (Cambridge University Press, 2018) is an incisive study of continuity as well as change in Pakistan that has moved the country towards religious conservatism and increased authoritarianism.

Akhtar, a political scientist and self-confessed left-wing activist, documents the development of political power in Pakistan that with the military dictatorship in the 1980s of General Zia ul-Haq ended an era of more liberal and left-wing politics and put the country on a path of right-wing religious ultra-conservatism from which it has yet to deviate. In tracking that development, Akhtar's book makes a significant contribution by focussing not only on its ideological but also its economic aspects as well as the religious right's appeal to urban shopkeepers and traders. He projects the religious right as a vehicle for subordinate classes to access the state and claim a stake in status quo politics.

Akhtar's contribution with this book is also his analysis of the waning of counter-hegemonic and transformative politics in Pakistan. Akhtar notes that the perceived benefits of carving out a stake in a patronage-based system far outstrip the cost and risk of efforts to transform the system. It is that cost-benefit analysis that has given Pakistan politics resilience and undergird a system in which religion is the ultimate source of legitimacy at the expense of any opposition to class and state power. In looking at how subordinate classes cope through the politics of common sense, Akhtar's book represents a significant and innovative addition to the study not only of Pakistan but of an era in which religious, nationalist and populist forces are on the rise.

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