

INTERVIEW

Q&A with Professor Ayesha Jalal

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1. *The Sole Spokesman* was a groundbreaking study challenging British and Indian perceptions of Jinnah. Since then, you have written several books that offer an incisive critique of democracy and freedom in Pakistan and more broadly South Asia. Recently your focus has been on oceanic Islam. What is the relationship between your current work and your previous work?

My previous and current work are intrinsically connected as they are inspired by questions about different aspects of South Asian history in general, and Pakistan in particular. So, for instance, *The Sole Spokesman* (1985) was a result of my curiosity about the historical dynamics that led to the creation of Pakistan, which was a direct response to General Zia ul-Haq's contention that the country was created solely in the name of religion. *The State of Martial Rule* (1990) probed the historical reasons for military dominance in Pakistan while *Democracy and Authoritarianism* (1995) investigated why despite a common colonial legacy, India and Pakistan evolved different kinds of political systems.

2. What was the motivation behind a book such as *Partisans of Allah*, and what are some of the key ideas from Islamic ethics that informed this book.

In my book *Self and Sovereignty* (2000), I had made a heuristic distinction between religion as identity and religion as faith. After the publication of that book, I felt the question of religion as faith needed further investigation. My research made me realize that the concept of jihad was contingent on the quality of the believer's faith, which was a stretch removed from its depictions in the media as outright violence and perpetual war against infidels. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on American soil, it made sense to do a book examining the meanings of "jihad" in the South Asian context, and this is what led to my writing *Partisans of Allah*.

3. Community is a motif that runs through your work; what is the significance of the relation between nation and community in your work?

Both concepts are historical constructs, and I was interested in tracing the development of the community-turning-nation when I was working on *Self and Sovereignty*. By studying how the community was imagined, I was able to gain valuable insights into the construction of the nation in the process of its making. For instance, it became apparent that the idea of the "community" was historically conceived by an individual or group of individuals. By the same token the "nation" too was a product of the imaginings of several individuals. Since the community and nation are historically constructed, they are in principle open to different kinds of imaginings, which can be more inclusive and accommodating of differences not only between human beings but also between humans and non-humans. This is quite different from viewing community and nation as predetermined givens that are impervious to change. Seen in this way, the significance of the relationship between nation and community lies in liberating the mind from the limitations of an unchangeable reality and instead imbuing it with a sense of responsibility to help envisage and create something better and more appropriate.

4. Your work draws on literary figures from Muhammad Iqbal to Saadat Hasan Manto alongside a historical analysis. In what ways do you think both writers contribute to Critical Pakistan Studies.

While Iqbal is hailed as the poetic visionary of Pakistan, Manto is reviled in certain quarters as a renegade who wrote "obscene" literature. In my reading of both men, their thought and work has not been understood in Pakistan, allowing for Iqbal's cherry-picked appropriation by officialdom and right-wing ideologues that is fundamentally at odds with the substance of his philosophy. There is also much more to Manto's fiction and non-fiction than his biting exposures of society and human consciousness that so embarrass *ashrafi* or middle to upper-middle-class sensibilities. Both men are treasure troves of knowledge and insights. Their work must be read and understood so that the critical faculties that have been so dulled by decades of rote learning and suffocating authoritarianism can be nourished and developed in Pakistan. This is a tall order but also necessary if there is to be anything remotely resembling a vibrant and sustainable "Critical Pakistan Studies."

5. Coexistence, peace-building, and cosmopolitanism are big ideas that have informed your work on Pakistan and South Asia. How important are these ideas for the future of South Asia in a global and local context?

Ideas matter regardless of how perilous the situation may be. The manifold challenges facing a badly divided, impoverished, and nuclearized South Asia call for some semblance of coexistence and peace-building based on enlightened, expansive, and farsighted thinking. Divisive rhetoric and heightening animosities may help at the hustings but cannot pave the way for efficient governance and a vibrant economy where there are opportunities for everyone, particularly those at the bottom rungs of the social ladder. If mutually assured destruction is not an option for South Asia's nuclearized states, as we periodically hear amid a rising crescendo of national animosities and economic woes, then some of the ideas that have guided my work for over four decades must be considered relevant for the region's present and future. I had for instance argued in my 1995 book *Democracy and Authoritarianism* that the two concepts are not antithetical but represent two ends of the same spectrum along which the tussle between resistance and dominance takes place. Authoritarianism is on the rise across South Asia today but that does not mean that the democratic impulse has ceased to matter and will not triumph in the near or distant future.

6. What will be the legacy of the power-sharing system at the core of the country's politics for Pakistan's burgeoning youth population.

If by the "power-sharing system" you mean the so-called hybrid regime, then there is little doubt that the legacy is overwhelmingly negative for the youth of the country, most of whom are literally dying to leave for greener pastures anywhere else in the world. Repeated failed attempts at social and political engineering have so discredited politics and politicians that the youth, if they are at all discerning, have lost all hope. Those more prone to being led by the Pied Piper of Hamelin will continue looking for a messiah who can magically alter their condition with the least effort on their own part.

7. Is the parliamentary system fit for purpose?

The parliamentary system has not been allowed to function in Pakistan where a dominant military establishment in combination with non-elected civilian institutions have called the shots to the severe detriment of a working democracy. Instead of writing off the parliamentary form of government, which has been manipulated and broken down to prevent a shift in the balance of power from non-elected to elected institutions, it is more meaningful to try and identify the combination of domestic, regional, and international factors that have made its operations so difficult and ineffectual.

8. What are your thoughts on the universal health care scheme that was launched by Imran Khan. Has it changed things for people who can't afford to pay privately for health care.

Pakistan has had a notoriously inadequate public health care system and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf's (PTI's) efforts to change that by providing access to the impoverished strata through the Sehat Card scheme was laudable. But as always

tends to happen with pro-poor schemes in the country, the prospectus of the program was much better than actual achievements on the ground. Some poor families no doubt benefitted, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, but their numbers have been too few and far between to significantly alter the deeply embedded inequities of the health care system in Pakistan. For instance, health practitioners have pointed to inadequate funding for certain types of medical care, making the program impracticable for the more expensive kinds of treatments. With the change of government, the Sehat Card scheme, though not formally abandoned, is proving even more difficult to implement. There have been reports of private hospitals refusing treatment to patients possessing the card, forcing families to pay out of their own pockets or, failing that, to turn to poorly equipped and understaffed public hospitals.

9. How do you think Imran Khan will be remembered?

It all depends on who is doing the remembering. Imran Khan is a national icon and generally will be remembered as a cricketing star who led Pakistan to its only World Cup victory in 1992. His political role, however, is a far more contentious issue. He has a cult following and his supporters hail him as a veritable messiah who can do no wrong and has all the answers to Pakistan's ills. His detractors denounce him for being narcissistic, myopic, incompetent, and complicit in corruption – something he had vowed to put an end to within 90 days of assuming power. Those who do not subscribe to either of these two extreme positions will likely remember him as someone who compromised with the military establishment to slot himself into power in 2018 but then fell victim to the structural imbalances in a country where an all-powerful army high command makes it difficult for an elected or selected leader to govern effectively.

10. What will be the legacy of the single national curriculum that was launched by Imran Khan? Critics of the single national curriculum have argued that it reiterates an ideological agenda that advocates the principles of a unitary Islamic nationalism. Those in favor of it see it as a means of aligning the education curriculum across madrasas to private schools. Is this the change that Pakistan needs?

A “single national curriculum” (SNC) of sorts consistent with principles of a unitary Islamic nationalism was already in place even before the PTI government's initiative. Like other schemes of the short-lived PTI government, the SNC is plagued by both conceptual and practical contradictions. The notion of eliminating the apartheid between Urdu and English medium schools and bringing madrasas on par with private and public schools irrespective of the social and economic background of the students may be well-intentioned. But without paying close attention to the quality of the education imparted under the SNC, the policy is likely to result in a precipitous decline in educational standards. The “uniform” curriculum scheme also goes against the 18th constitutional amendment of 2010, devolving education to the provinces, and is perceived as a unilateral attempt by the federal government at the behest to the military establishment to further indoctrinate an already conservative society. Implementation of the scheme is spread over several years, but the immediate impact has been the stipulation that school sessions begin every day with recitations from the

Quran, which goes against the principle of not forcing Islamic teachings on non-Muslim students. In a society wracked by sectarian and inter-communitarian tensions, the SNC's provisions are bound to increase tensions along religious lines, clearly not something Pakistan needs.

11. How significant are negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) when it comes to Pakistan's international relations and economic survival?

Despite the political rhetoric surrounding the long drawn-out negotiations, Pakistan had small choice but to turn to the IMF to try and wriggle out of the economic trap its policymakers and stakeholders have laid for themselves. The positive response of the stock market to the IMF agreement is indicative of its importance. Without the agreement, Pakistan cannot avail of the financial flows it is expecting from various friendly countries, an unacceptable situation for a stagnant economy. But the agreement is not enough to pull Pakistan out of the economic morass it finds itself in. Major structural changes are needed to expand the tax base, increase productivity, promote exports, and reduce the balance-of-payments deficit.

12. What do you see as the solution to the Kashmir question, is it a political or a military one?

There is no solution to the Kashmir problem militarily in a context where both India and Pakistan are nuclearized powers. A political solution is the only answer, and it must be a resolution of the long-standing conflict acceptable to the people of Kashmir, who have for too long been treated as pawns in a game of political chess by India and Pakistan. This requires rethinking the analytical concepts that are used to define the issue, such as sovereignty and self-determination. Instead of sticking to the hollow concept of a monolithic sovereignty that is absolute and non-negotiable, there is a need to adopt a more flexible and realistic notion of sovereignty based on the accommodation of the aspirations of the different people of the state of Jammu and Kashmir.

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