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Book Review

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Under the Gun: Political Parties and Violence in Pakistan

Niloufer A. Siddiqui. New York, Cambridge University Press, 2023. 300 pp. Paper, $29.99.

In *Under the Gun*, Siddiqui compellingly explains why and how political parties deploy violence by focusing on aspects of the parties in question rather than looking at individual or cross-national macrolevel analyses. She also challenges extant scholarship that contends that parties' use of violence is primarily an artifact of weak state capacity. Instead, she argues that political and economic circumstances give rise to the incentives that parties face to maintain violence specialists either within the party or to develop ties with external specialists. The choice to employ violence is driven by a fairly straightforward assessment of costs and benefits of doing so for the party.

She limits her study to the main parties of Pakistan, all of which operate in areas of contested hegemony and partial state control. She argues that in areas where parties have a captive support base—where support for the party is relatively inelastic—voters are less likely to punish parties for using violence. This kind of environment exists where there are specific kinds of cleavages, notably ethnic cleavages in the cases she assesses. It is inadequate to find violence potentially advantageous: parties must also possess the ability to perpetrate violence. Siddiqui argues that a party's organizational structure determines whether it is capable of carrying out violence on its own or whether it must rely upon external violence specialists. Organizationally strong parties (i.e., those with strong party apparati, robust local presence, and which use socialized party workers to contest elections) are more likely to have their in-house violence specialists while organizationally weak parties—those with few workers, little local presence, and and which rely upon local elites to contest elections—are more likely to depend upon external violence entrepreneurs.

Siddiqui's mobilization of various forms of data is nothing short of brilliant. Siddiqui has conducted several important experimental surveys over the years which illuminate how respondents' opinions about an array of matters salient to this study. Siddiqui, who is fluent in Urdu, also conducted hundreds of interviews with political party workers, politicians, and journalists, among others. She has also analyzed political party manifestos and other primary documents. This is in addition to her mastery of the secondary literature far beyond the remit of South Asia.

She exposits her argument in eight chapters in addition to the introduction and the first chapter, which lays out her essential logic. The third chapter provides a masterful overview of the political-military and social structures in Pakistan that bound her study. As she notes, the particulars of Pakistan may limit the generalizability of her arguments.

In the next four chapters, she lays out the case studies upon which her argument in built. Chapter 4 concerns the Muttahidi Quami Movement (MQM), which operates in the Pakistani megacity of Karachi and some urban areas in Sindh. The MQM, for much of its career, was a strong party that enjoyed inelastic support of ethnic Muhajirs in Pakistan. Muhajir, which means "migrant," refers to those Urdu speakers who fled India for Pakistan during and shortly after partition. They mostly came to Karachi, where their presence soon antagonized the Sindhi "sons of the soil." As conflicts raged in Afghanistan and in the Pashtun areas of Pakistan going back to 1973, Pashtuns also migrated to the city. With different ethnic groups segregated into enclaves, the MQM benefited from violence because it hardened its electoral base. Thus, the MQM is an example of a strong party with internal violence specialists, which operates in a competitive environment, with an inelastic voter base that benefits electorally from violence. While the MQM had a good run with this strategy, it ultimately overplayed its hand provoking the Pakistani Rangers to raid the party's headquarters in 2015, as well as the party's secretariat. It arrested over one hundred activists, dozens of whom were presented before an antiterrorism court. In the 2018 elections, it was decimated. This is due not only to the evisceration of their party but also to the rise of Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), which made pan-ethnic, populist appeals.

Chapter 5 turns to the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) and their affiliated gangs in Lyari, also in Karachi. Despite its promising origins, the PPP is not an organizationally strong party. However, in Karachi (and elsewhere in Sindh), it tended to have an inelastic support base until recently because the party claimed to represent the Sindhis as well the Baloch, both of whom conflicted with the Muhajirs. Because the PPP is organizationally weak, it was not able to maintain an internal cadre of violence specialists. However, the PPP assessed that it needed violence to fend off the MQM from inroads into the PPP's legal and illegal commercial enterprises in its base of Lyari in Karachi. Necessarily, the PPP relied upon external violence entrepreneurs, who were gangsters under the auspices of the ironically named People's Aman (Peace) Committee (PAC). In fact, the PPP was so reliant upon the PAC that the PAC selected the candidates to contest elections, not the PPP. This strategy also worked for some time until it too invited a crackdown in 2011, rendering the PAC ineffective. In 2018, the PPP faced a devastating loss: the son of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto and heir apparent, Bilawal Bhutto, lost his contest. The afore-noted PTI easily took Lyari.

Chapter 6 turns to the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) in the Punjab. The PML-N is an organizationally weak party, with its strongest presence in Pakistan's Punjab province. Given that the Punjab is mostly ethnically homogenous, parties operating in the Punjab field Punjabi candidates. As with all parties in Punjab, the PML-N faces an elastic vote bank, as there are few if any captive constituencies. The PML-N must rely upon tribal and family/clan (biradari) notables to contest elections on their ticket. Since these electables are available to the highest bidder, they frequently switch tickets in different elections. In recent decades, the

PML-N has aligned with sectarian terrorist groups even though the party has often taken positions against these groups. This fact reflects a changing power structure in the Punjab in recent decades: sectarian militant groups have become more influential and thus are forces to be reckoned with in particular areas. Even the ostensibly left-of-center PPP has aligned with these militants for purposes of electoral calculations in Pakistan's first past the post system. However, the PML-N has to manage the costs of these alliances because these sectarian groups have committed numerous outrages in the Punjab. Thus PML-N leadership has at times tried to encourage them to engage in violence outside of the province. Given the increasing prominence of these sectarian groups, this strategy is likely to perdure. It's not yet clear how the PTI will manage these dynamics in the Punjab. While the PML-N won a majority of seats in 2018, the PTI put up a strong showing.

Chapter 7 exposits the choices employed by the Awami National Party (ANP) in the vastly different venues in which it operates: the violence-afflicted, Pashtun-dominant province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and Karachi. The ANP is an organizationally strong party that ostensibly faces incentives to employ violence but opts not to in KP likely because it would face strong voter backlash because it does not enjoy an inelastic vote bank. The Pashtuns of KP have several other parties who could satisfy their interests. However, the same party does engage in violence in Karachi where it operates at the behest of the captive Pashtun voters who are in ethnic conflict with the other ethnic groups in Karachi. This case demonstrates how the social and political circumstances dictate choices made by the same party in two distinct arenas.

Chapter 8 extends her theory to several out-of-sample shadow cases including the Shiv Sena, a Marathi ethnic, Hindu nationalist party operating largely in the Indian state of Maharashtra; Imran Khan's PTI noted previously; the People's Democratic Party in Nigeria; as well as a discussion of electoral politics in the Philippines. While these partial cases demonstrate the strength of her case, it may have been more interesting had she provided examples of parties whose behavior do not comport with her predictions.

She concludes the volume with thoughtful reflections on the limitations of the use of violence as well as the larger implications of her work for developing democracies. This book will be of enormous import to scholars of political violence generally but also scholars of South Asia generally and Pakistan in particular.

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