

# NOREF Book Review

## Anatol Lieven, *Pakistan: A Hard Country* (London: Allen Lane, 2011)

Reviewed by Marco Mezzera

### Executive summary

In his latest book on Pakistan, Anatol Lieven takes the reader on a revealing journey through that troubled country. Departing from a title that is subtly misleading, as it seems to announce misfortunes befalling the country's fragile state structure, the author, a professor of International Relations and Terrorism Studies at King's College London and an expert on South Asia, decides instead to take a provocative detour by presenting Pakistan indeed as a weak state, but at the

same time a strong society. Throughout the book the analysis keeps balancing on this tightrope of competing definitions, trying to build up a convincing case for the inner resilience of the country. At the end, however, the reader is left with a sensation that despite all the arguments and evidence that have been provided (or maybe because of them), the future of Pakistan remains still wrapped in unfathomable indeterminateness.

### The reviewer

**Marco Mezzera** is a senior adviser at NOREF. He has 15 years of policy research experience in conflict and development issues, with a specific geographical focus on Pakistan and South-east Asia. He holds an MSc in Development Studies and has co-authored four books and written several articles and policy reports.

## **Weak state, strong societies**

Anatol Lieven is doubtless well placed to draw a fine and comprehensive picture of Pakistan's recent history of inner distresses. His work in the country and surrounding region spans more than two decades, as he started to report about the imminent end of the Soviet adventure in Afghanistan towards the end of the 1980s. That robust experience and the notes that he has carefully taken throughout the years appear to have led him to a conclusion that strongly collides with all the alarming warnings of impending state collapse that have characterised reporting about Pakistan in the international media.

But make no mistake: the author does not pretend to diminish the enormous challenges that have tested this country from its inception. Nonetheless, through a careful analysis of Pakistan's historical evolution, combined with the identification of what he believes to be key structures of this evolution, he concludes that while state institutions are certainly fragile, nonetheless society in its various forms has shown remarkable resilience. Further, the interesting postil about this thesis is that both state weakness and society strength are actually two sides of the same coin and as such are deeply interconnected.

## **The power of kinship**

State institutions, the book's reasoning goes, have remained weak because the major actors in society have had no interest in a strong centralised state. Pakistan's society still relies on deeply embedded traditional values that make no space for the formalisation of rules according to the normally accepted concept of a modern, democratic state. This is where the key concept of "kinship system" enters into Lieven's analysis. Probably with the only exception of the army, which forms a kind of separate "caste" within Pakistani society, the concept of kinship pervades almost all facets of Pakistanis' daily lives. It is also the most powerful aggregation factor, over-riding all the other elements around which Pakistani individual identity is generally believed to be centred. Religious, ethnic and political affiliations remain undoubtedly powerful mobilising factors, but it is the kinship relationship of the individual

that will eventually determine his/her most fundamental choices.

If the kinship group is indeed the foundational unit within Pakistani society, then it logically follows that most of the country's formal institutions must be deeply penetrated and influenced by it. Patterns of patronage do indeed emerge, determining the way in which decisions concerning the management of the public good are taken. And this is where Pakistan earns its relatively "high" marks on the scale of international corruption, ranking 134th out of 182 countries in the 2011 Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index. Governance in Pakistan, according to the book, is thus defined as a redistributive system that establishes reciprocally dependent relationships between rulers and subjects. There is no unquestioned authority in Pakistan, except perhaps in the case of the tribal chieftains of Balochistan. Those who want to rise to the role of respected leader in their own specific context, be it at the village level or at the national government level, have to obey the rule according to which the loyalty of their followers needs to be bought by a fair redistribution of favours. It is this clientelistic system that holds the texture of society together and helps prevent its sudden takeover by radical forces, while at the same time impeding the full development of social reform movements.

## **The privileged position of the military**

If there were one state institution that Lieven would probably spare amidst this bleak landscape of patronage-cum-inefficiency, this would doubtless be the military. The book describes this institution as a stalwart of order, discipline and efficiency. Its incredibly strong internal cohesiveness has proven resilient enough in the face of all those dismembering forces that have had such nefarious effects on the rest of Pakistani society. And the army is also regarded as the only strong institution within an otherwise weak state that has been able to counter the threat of Islamist militancy. The military operation that the army launched during the spring of 2009 in reaction to the daring push forward of the Swat Taliban, which brought them within 70 miles of Islamabad, served as a stark reminder to the enemies of the

state, but also to the often-sceptical international community, that Pakistan was not yet ready to succumb to Islamist extremists.

And according to Lieven, this will not happen in the foreseeable future either – at least as long as the U.S. does not embark on policies that are overtly hostile to or destabilising for Pakistan. In particular the author refers to such policies that could, for instance, confirm Pakistan's worst fears of encirclement by arch-rival India, or even to U.S. ground operations on Pakistani soil in response to extreme provocations by Afghan Taliban moving across the border with Pakistan.

In his evident admiration for the stabilising effect of the army and for its capacity to present an image of the country that does not reflect the usual dismal corruption and indifference of its political class, the author unfortunately seems to omit some of the less pleasant aspects that make the army such an efficient institution in the use of violence. This lack of a nuanced focus is particularly manifest in the Balochistan chapter. Here, Lieven lingers mainly on the backwardness of the local tribes and their anachronistic hierarchical order. The roots of the various insurgency waves are often identified with a specific chieftain's quest for power and patronage rather than with a genuine agenda for ethnic independence. The army represents the authority of the state in this restive province and it fulfils the critical role of guaranteeing the needed security coverage to the few large-scale economic activities taking place there. The central question of human rights violations, especially the frequent disappearance

of young activists, remains broadly untouched, despite numerous allegations of involvement of the army and paramilitary units in these kinds of ominous acts.

In conclusion, the most important merit of the book rests in its articulated attempt to explain the resilience of a country that seems constantly on the brink of collapse, but that time and again manages to regain its bearings. The arguments are built on a close examination of Pakistan's fundamental social structures and the effects that they have on the country's religious and political dimensions.

The analysis flows with substantial lightness and consistency, and when the reader reaches its end it retains a feeling of utter clarity. Unfortunately, this feeling is not due to last for very long. The moment one starts moving beyond the ordered elements of the analysis, the chaotic and incomprehensible nature of the country emerges again in all its violence.

Lieven is probably well aware of this particular feature and he seems to accept it. In the end, he probably expects the chaos and unruliness to continue under the same sort of mysterious equilibrium that has allowed Pakistan to remain in existence since its troubled inception. If a real existential threat needs to be identified, he seems to say, then it should not be expected in the form of violence among human beings, but by the violence and negligence that these same human beings have been inflicting for too long on Pakistan's fragile ecological balance.