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Book Review: Politics of Desecularization: Law and the Minority Question in Pakistan by Sadia Saeed

Jayanta K. Sarmah

Manisha Kalita

Michael L. Hirsch

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Saeed, Sadia *Politics of Desecularization: Law and the Minority Question in Pakistan*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. xiv + 269. Hardcover, \$59.79, Softcover \$29.99.

Issues of nationalism, minority rights, and inclusion are among the most perplexing challenges faced by modern democracies. In *Politics of Desecularization: Law and the Minority Question in Pakistan*, Sadia Saeed explores the complexity of such issues by examining the changing status of the Ahmadis (Islamic strand whose founder's claims of prophecy led some Muslims to question the Ahmadi's Muslim identity) within the Pakistani state. In examining their status from the colonial era to the modern time, Saeed demonstrates how internal and external factors have influenced the Ahmadi's fate. Saeed's Introduction begins in 2010 when two Ahmadi Pakistani mosques were attacked by a militant Muslim group. The attacks demonstrate the gravity of the rift between the Ahmadi and some non-Ahmadi Muslims in Pakistan. Saeed examines the Ahmadi's emergence, how they were initially accommodated in colonial and post-colonial India and Pakistan, and what led to their marginalization and eventual criminalization "for adhering to non-conventional interpretation of Islamic Religious tenants"(p.2). Her work is contextualized within theories on nationalism and secularism. Saeed offers a framework for examining the processes of secularization and desecularization set against state-religion relations as settled or unsettled. She believes the changing status of the Ahmadis is an expression of the unsettled nature of Pakistan's state-religion relations.

In the first chapter, Saeed digs into the colonial history of the Ahmadis. She claims that the interaction between the religious field, the political field and the public arena, fueled the Ahmadi question. The British policy of non-interference in religious matters and the pronouncements of Ghulam Ahmad (the Ahmadi founder) created a rift between Ahmadis and non-Ahmadi Muslims. The British's policy of communal politics laced with democracy, hardened religious differences within the political field. The creation of Pakistan as a Muslim

state from India at the end of British rule was an expression of the hardening of religious difference within the region and created a religious-political framework within which the Ahmadi's status would later be questioned.

The second and third chapters focus on the inclusion and exclusion of Ahmadis in the post-colonial period. Saeed argues that it is the failure on the part of the Pakistani Constituent Assembly to uphold a strong official ideology on religious freedom resulted in the subsequent discord within Pakistan. While the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan debated Pakistan's National Flag and the Preamble to Pakistan's constitution, the voices of minorities opposing the endorsement of a Muslim national identity were suppressed by the majoritarian Muslim nationalism setting the groundwork for the subsequent democratic exclusion of the Ahmadis. In the struggle to create a feeling of nationalism among the disparate groups within Pakistan, its *raison d'être*—its Muslim identity—was elevated to smooth over other internal differences.

Both the autocratic regime of Ayud Khan and the democratic regime of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto play to Muslim conservatives to maintain political power. The ascendancy of the Pakistan's Muslim political identity gains momentum during the passage of the Second Constitutional Amendment (SCA) of 1974 which declared Ahmadi's to be non-Muslim. Those in positions of power and who might have opposed the SCA's passage were silenced by a perceived lack of autonomy and/or fear. Whether or not Khan and/or Bhutto embraced the beliefs of those leading the anti-Ahmadi movements, opportunistic actions by both their regimes resulted in the “institutionalization of exclusions” (p. 144).

Zia-ul-Haq's use of religious symbols to legitimate his authoritarian rule is explored in Chapter 4. His regime passed the 1984 Ordinance which forbids Ahmadis from calling themselves Muslim, describing their religion as Islam, or from preaching their faith. An

accompanying blasphemy clause made the Ahmadis vulnerable to punishment if they did not follow the new rules. Efforts to pass this ordinance were opposed by both liberal secularists and by some Muslims whose interpretations of ‘sharia’ included the provision of religious freedom and/or the accommodation for other faiths. Saeed believes Haq’s exclusionary religious nationalism opened the door to the growth of religious fundamentalism in Pakistan.

Saeed also studies the role of the courts in the marginalization of the Ahmadi’s and in feeding the process of desecularization. In Pakistan’s early years, most judges were Western-leaning and acted with judicial independence toward both the Ahmadi and non-Ahmadi Muslims. Through time, however, the courts increasingly became sites of religious contestation. Saeed sees a judicialization of religious politics in the 1960s when judges started to invoke Islamic norms to supplement constitutional laws. After Zia-ul-Haq comes to power by military coup in 1977, the whole judiciary is placed under the oversight of a Federal Shariat Court and the Shariat Appellate Bench of the Supreme Court. Like his predecessors Haq played to anti-Ahmadi religious conservatives. Under his rule members of the Ahmadi community are prohibited by law from referring to themselves as Muslim. In Pakistan the silencing of “...minority and dissenting voices remains a defining feature of desecularization...” (p. 176).

In her conclusion, Saeed again reviews desecularization in Pakistan through the lens of the Ahmadi question. For her secularism as a traditional concept has seen an erosion of value with the advent of modernity. This is especially true in countries struggling to sustain a unifying sense of nationality, governed with unsettled religion-state relations, and working to create a sense of harmony among a large number of cultural groups. Pakistan is a case in point.

This is a brilliant piece of scholarship. Saeed displays a mastery of historical sociology and political theory. Her research involves extensive interviews with numerous principle actors from the many eras she investigates. The data generated by the interviews is complemented by good use of court and legislative records as well as newspaper accounts. It provides a vivid chronological reconstruction of the events leading to the Ahmadis' marginalization with extraordinary details on times, places, and players. The result is a sophisticated and detailed account of the desecularization in Pakistan vis-à-vis anti-Ahmadi politics.

This book would be an appropriate selection in graduate classes in Historical Sociology, the Sociology of Religion, Religion and Law, and in seminars on Pakistani discourses. It is a must read for students of Pakistan and would inform all those interested in the creation of nationalism and the modern nation-state. It is one of the best pieces of scholarship we have read in many years.

Jayanta K. Sarmah
Professor in Political Science
Gauhati University
Guwahati, India

Manisha Kalita
Research Scholar in Political Science
Gauhati University
Guwahati, India

Michael L. Hirsch
Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences
Huston-Tillotson University
Austin, Texas