

The Captive State: Corruption, Intelligence Agencies, and Ethnicity in Pakistan

Oskar Verkaaik

'PIA' stands for Pakistan International Airlines, but not according to many *Muhajirs*. The term Muhajir is widely used in Pakistan for those whose families migrated from India in the years after independence in 1947. Most of them live in the two big cities of Karachi and Hyderabad in the southern province of Sindh. Since the 1980s, they massively support a political party called the MQM (Muhajir Qaumi Movement: Muhajir National/Ethnic Movement) that has given shape to a collective and political Muhajir identity. In 1996 and 1997 I did fieldwork in one particular Muhajir neighborhood in Hyderabad^[1] - an area of shoemakers, blacksmiths, shopkeepers, street vendors, banglemakers, rickshaw drivers, and their families. In this area, most people would say that the official meaning of PIA is merely a promising veil of national solidarity which conceals a rather disgusting face of ethnic exclusivism. The real but hidden meaning of PIA, they say, is *Punjabi* International Airlines.

PIA offers its white collar employees safety of employment, good educational facilities, excellent medical care, housing in quiet, clean, and safe enclaves separated from the dusty and often dangerous city areas which surround them, cheap possibilities for foreign travel, and high social status. Apart from the army, the PIA may be the most attractive state-owned employer in Pakistan. But many of my Muhajir acquaintances say that they would never stand a chance if they would apply for a position in the PIA. That, they insist, has nothing to do with merit. On the contrary, they maintain that Muhajirs are well-known to be the most educated and patriotic people of Pakistan. Yet the PIA has been captured by Punjabis and Punjabis will never allow a stranger to enter their stronghold.

This is typical, they say, for the way Punjabis control *all* state institutions. The way they do this is through family ties. A typical Punjabi extended family consists of brothers, cousins, and uncles, who among themselves divide the strategically important posts. One is sent into the army, another develops a network among bureaucrats, a third

^[1] This study was part of a dissertation project which has resulted in a dissertation entitled 'Inside the Citadel: Fun, Violence, and Religious Nationalism in Hyderabad, Pakistan'. The research has been financed by the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO) and was carried out at the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research (ASSR).

takes care of the landed property, a fourth does the dirty work in the *Punjabi Muslim League*, a fifth works himself up into the rank and file of the rival *Pakistan People's Party*, a sixth may become a judge, a seventh starts a family branch in the US, an eight joins the PIA, etc. If one branch suffers, the others make up for the losses. As a whole, the Punjabi family prospers.

When my informers talk like this, it is not always clear what they mean by 'the Punjabi family'. Do they allude to several families who happen to be Punjabi? Or do they talk about all Pakistani Punjabis who live like one extended family? The question appears irrelevant to them. What matters is that Punjabis arrange things according to the wrong sense of loyalty. The Pakistani state, after all, is a creation for all South Asian Muslims. Its fruits belong to all Pakistani citizens. Muhajirs too have the right to a share of the profits of the PIA. Any true Muslim would recognize that. Yet Punjabis, like Westerners - sorry, my friend, don't take it personally - only care about money. They would sell Pakistan, a state created in the name of Islam, to American capitalists. Such an unpatriotic attitude is in their blood. Did they not form the backbone of the British-colonial army? A typical Punjabi would even sell his own mother if it would benefit his interests. Small wonder, then, that Pakistan is in such a sorry state today, captured as it is by unpatriotic hypocrites who only use Islam for their own purposes.

I have to admit that I have not quoted anyone in particular in this introduction. It is rather a loose compilation of many casual conversations. Perhaps none of my informers would endorse this view entirely - certainly not when it would be presented to them by a foreigner or on paper. Yet the text contains a basic idea that I have often heard in Hyderabad, namely that the Pakistani state is made in the name of Islam and belongs to the whole of the Pakistani nation, but is captured by one ethnic group. This chapter is meant to examine more fully this interrelatedness between Islam, ethnicity, and images of the state in popular discourse among Muhajir residents of Hyderabad and Karachi.

To do this, I want to relate Dale Eickelman's & James Piscatori's remarks on the character of Muslim politics to an approach for studying the state as proposed by Philip Abrams and put to practice by Akhil Gupta in the case of South Asia. The aim is to show how people in Pakistan can talk about the state. I will argue that the modern nation-state is collectively imagined as a space of legitimate power, relatively unconnected to and untouched by real power struggles that are going on within society, and that this is done by depicting the state as an expression, or even the guardian, of true Islamic principles of loyalty and authority. State functionaries, government leaders, and others associated with the process of nation-building and state formation in Pakistan have promoted an image of the state as being opposed to, and aimed to reform, prevailing 'unislamic' tendencies within society, such as ethnic or kinship loyalty and 'feudalism'. At present, societal groups and emancipatory movements appropriate and use this discourse for their own purposes. Continuing to reify the ideal of the state as the potential promotor of a just society, they also accuse the elites associated with state power of polluting this ideal by using it as a veil to conceal the very particularistic loyalties the state is supposed to reform. This has added to an increasing crisis of state authority as for instance indicated by extremely low turn-outs during national elections, a growing sense of displacement among certain societal groups, as well as a growing

polarization within Pakistani society as for instance manifested in the rise of ethnic and sectarian movements. I will end with some remarks on why the widely held assumption that the rise of social unrest and social/political violence is caused by a collapse of state authority is too simplistic as it focuses solely on changes that occur within state institutions and ignores possibly more important transformations in society at large.

Muslim politics and the reification of the state

To a large extent the contention of Eickelman & Piscatori that Islam constitutes the moral-symbolic language of Muslim politics is also true for Pakistan. Eickelman & Piscatori argue that most political debating, bargaining, and cajoling in Muslim societies contain explicit references or more implicit allusions to Islamic notions of loyalty, authority, respect, justice, solidarity, etc. Of course, despite claims to the contrary, Islam leaves much room for disagreement over such issues. In modern societies, Islam may serve many goals and objectives as no person or institution enjoys the monopoly on the interpretation of Islamic traditions. As is for instance clear in the case of women movements, however, it is practically impossible, or at least unwise, to reject Islam altogether as a common ground for social-political discourse (Eickelman & Piscatori 1996).

Apart from, and in addition to, Islam, the state constitutes another legitimizing principle in the name of which people claim to say or do things. It is probably true that for a long time states were built and maintained in the name of something else, like the monarch, the emperor, a religion; all the same, the idea that the state itself constitutes an autonomous principle of authority seems to be at least several centuries old. This idea is based on what Philip Abrams calls the reification of the state into an almost sacred entity in the name of which order must be restored or people can be asked to make sacrifices - an idea of order which to a large extent helps shape people's perception of social reality. Since Abrams himself formulates what he has in mind more accurately than I can, it is best to quote him somewhat extensively:

[T]he state is not the reality which stands behind the mask of political practice. It is itself the mask which prevents our seeing political practice as it is.... There *is* a state-system....: a palpable nexus of practice and institutional structure centred in government and more or less extensive, unified and dominant in any given society.... There is, too, a state-idea, projected, purveyed and variously believed in in different societies at different times.... The state comes into being as a structuration within political practice; it starts its life as an implicit construct; it is then reified... and acquires an overt symbolic identity progressively divorced from practice as an illusory account of practice. The ideological function is extended to a point where conservatives and radicals alike believe that their practice is not directed at each other but at the state; the world of illusion prevails. The task of the sociologist is to demystify; and in this context that means attending to the senses in which the state does not exist rather than to those in which it does (Abrams 1988: 82).

It is of some importance to see that the reification of the state can only be reached by separating the state from society, and that this separation is a discursive or imaginary practice. Concretely, state functionaries are seldomly, if ever, not part of society. They may belong to a particular ethnic community, an income group, they are men or women, etc; yet, they derive their power from the negation of their social identities and the claim that they, as state functionaries, stand outside or above society, act impartially and are not directed by any prejudice or self-interest. It is therefore important to study how this idea of impartiality and authority is being constructed and reproduced by people associated with state power. This includes the study of the symbolism of state rituals and processions, state monuments, military uniforms, bureaucratic new speech, etc.

Building upon these insights, Akhil Gupta has shown that popular images of the state hinge on the same separation of the state from society. In an article on popular debates about state corruption in a northern Indian village, Gupta argues that the very theme of corruption enables the villagers to maintain a division between themselves and local state representatives. While state functionaries enter local power struggles, they also deny this by claiming to act in the name of an impartial and translocal state. Not surprisingly, the villagers evaluate this discrepancy as hypocrisy or corruption. The villagers thus subscribe to the ideal of an impartial and translocal state and then condemn the activities of local state functionaries on the basis of these high expectations. While the ideal of an impartial state is maintained, the state as it is experienced locally, in contrast, is talked about as a pool of moral decay that pervades the state but has little effect on society. The separation between state and society is thus maintained in order to confront the power abuse of local state functionaries with the moral superiority the villagers ascribe to themselves. The idea of a state that exists relatively independently of society may thus become the basis for rebellion, resistance, or other forms of subversive action (Gupta 1995).

In the case Gupta describes, the theme of corruption is the most important argument through which the villagers construct the image of a polluted state, or a besieged ideal of impartiality and justice. Although corruption serves a similar goal in Pakistan, I also think that Muhajirs in Hyderabad have more strategies at their disposal to make a similar argument about a besieged and conquered state. Ethnicity - or the argument that other ethnic groups have captured the state - is one of them. Apart from corruption and ethnicity I will also pay attention to a discourse revolving around secret intelligence agencies. Seen as the hidden, true power players operating behind the bureaucratic facade of the democratic state, intelligence agencies are said to corrupt the original ideals of the Pakistan Movement. I will furthermore discuss the presence of rumors and the production of a quasi-secret atmosphere in which to distribute such rumors which help construct the image of the captive state.

In this article, then, I will be most concerned with the myth of the state rather than with the doings of the state. Rather than focusing on the production of the state myth by state officials themselves - an issue someone like Timothy Mitchell (1991) has paid attention to - I will in this contribution limit myself mainly to the popular appropriation of this myth as it linked to the themes of corruption, ethnicity and the works of

intelligence agencies, all of which are 'hot issues' in popular debates in Pakistan today. To put these popular images of the state into perspective, however, I will first say a few things about state formation in Pakistan and how the idea of state authority has been linked to a modernist interpretation of Islam.

Islam and nationalism in Pakistan

State formation in Pakistan, as nation-building, is closely related to modernist trends in the interpretation of Islam as they were being developed throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Perhaps more than anybody else, the poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal has linked Islamic modernization to Pakistani Muslim nationalism. His ideas have been very influential in Pakistan, so much so that he is generally considered the national thinker of Pakistan. The most prestigious university of the country is named after him and his grave in Lahore, located next the Badshahi Mosque and other monuments of the Moghul empire, has become a place of secular pilgrimage for many Pakistani citizens. Iqbal argued that the future of an independent Muslim state in South Asia would rise or fall depending on the extent in which South Asian Muslims would be able to modernize Islam and free themselves from what he took as erroneous innovations and regional pre-Islamic traditions that had come to pervert the original revelations of the Prophet. The new state of Pakistan was thus not simply based on Islam, or the ideal of Muslim unity, but, more precisely, on a particular interpretation of Islam which stressed the importance of modern education leading to an individual *Bildung* into modern citizens and the ability to independent reasoning concerning religious matters (*ijtihad*). In nationalist ideology, particular practices were rejected as being traditional, backward, syncretic, a remainder of Hindu or colonial influence, and therefore un- or not-quite-Islamic.

Three sets of practices and mentalities were especially considered unworthy of a modern Pakistani citizen. The one that has been given most attention in academic writing is popular Sufism, and especially saint-worship, which is dismissed by many Pakistani as either a sign of backward mentality or an Hindu perversion (e.g. Ewing 1983 & 1997, Gilmartin 1988, Werbner & Basu 1998). Two others have been less noticed thus far. 'Feudalism' has been identified as being in contradiction with the Islamic ideal of social equality (*musawat*). In Pakistan today, words for different types of landlords, such as *jagirdar*, *zamindar*, and especially *wadera*, are widely used as insults in public conversation. In speeches, politicians accuse each other of wishing to rule Pakistan as 'their private *jagir*' (landed property). In TV series, the *wadera* persona is almost by definition the evil genius. This rather recent type of landlord who cannot flaunt an aristocratic background as he is mostly from a family who used to produce the village headman who worked as the representative of the more traditional *jagirdar* or *zamindar*, is typically portrayed as driving around his vast lands in a four wheel drive Pajero jeep with tinted windows, exploiting his bonded laborers (*haris*), raping their daughters and sons, drinking whiskey, and terrorising the countryside with the help of a private army of armed strongmen (*dacoits*). This talk probably has its roots in the power

struggle that has been going on in Pakistan between the city-based bureaucracy and military, and on the other hand regional elites of landlords (Jalal 1995).

Further, several forms of exclusivist solidarity which may divide the Muslim community have become under attack as being unislamic. This is most profoundly the case with the concept of caste (*zat*) which is widely condemned as being part of a brahmin ideology. As a result, many Pakistani have dropped their indigenous family names, most of which refer to a caste-specific occupation, such as *mochi* (cobbler) or *qasai* (butcher), and have adopted a so-called *ashraf* (noble) name with an origin in Islamic territories such as Arabia, Persia or Central Asia. To a lesser extent, kinship solidarity, as in so-called *biradaris* (endogamous groups), can be condemned as being in violation of the ideal of Muslim unity, as symbolized by the *hajj*, as well as the *hijra*, the exodus which marks the leaving behind of tribal ties in favor of a new religious community. Finally, regional solidarities, commonly labelled 'ethnic', are often said to endanger the all Muslim unity.

In the early decades of Pakistan independence, cultural and political elites depicted the state as a major initiator of social and cultural reform - literally as a set of parents (*ma-bap*) educating their children (Ahmad 1964: 103-120). Modernization was seen as a liberating gift presented by a social avant-garde to a backward society steeped in tradition. Modernization was a mixture of, on the one hand, a mimicry of things Western, including ideas of military discipline and economic development, a bureaucratic style of clothing, a knowledge of British philosophy and poetry - at a minimum, one was expected to be able to quote from Russell and Wordsworth - and on the other hand a training in a *sharif* or noble, mostly urban culture, centered around the Urdu language as it had been developed in the nineteenth century in northern India. Condemning saint-worship, 'feudalism', and particularistic loyalties as traditional and unislamic, members of urban elites tried to compete with established regional and rural political networks centered around powerful landlords and spiritual leaders. The effort to make the state of Pakistan prosper, as well as the attempt to purify Islam from Hindu and colonial influences, were their claims to legitimacy.

From the late 1960s onwards, a counter-discourse emerged which developed and promoted regional or 'ethnic' identities. With some exceptions, regionalists have not rejected the idea of Muslim nationalism as such, but have tried to give a new meaning to the concept through a much more positive evaluation of regional syncretic Islamic traditions. Especially *Sufism* or *tasawwuf*, as the mystical, less *shari'at*-oriented branch of Islam, has been reevaluated as a form of Islam that is more at home in the various provinces of Pakistan than the reformist notions of the urban modernist elite. There has been more attention for ecstatic practices, as well as for more physical expressions of faith - music, dancing, crying - which in the 1960s and 1970s especially attracted the urban, vaguely left-wing youth of students, intellectuals, artists, etc, who found in these passionate and swinging practices of devotion more opportunities for social rebellion, fun, and identity construction than in the modernist emphasis on the importance of reason (*'aql*) and discipline (*nazm*). In the province of Sindh - which together with formerly East-Pakistan became the most rebellious province in the late 1960s - the shrines of two local saints, Lal Shahbaz Qalandar and Shah Abdul Latif, became

important centers of regional resistance and the construction of a separate Sindhi religious and political identity.

The rediscovery of syncretic traditions and 'Sufism' was taken up by the Pakistan People's Party, which in 1970 won the first democratic elections in the history of Pakistan. During the administration of the PPP, ethnic or regional identities were promoted as intrinsically part of the complex identity of a Pakistani citizen. Whereas a Pakistani identity had always had a national and religious component, an ethnic one was now added to it. Four ethnic groups were more or less officially recognized and they coincided with provincial boundaries, so that a Pakistani was required to identify as either Punjabi, Sindhi, Pakhtun or Baluchi. Moreover, a *quota system*, which distributed positions in the civil service as well as places in educational institutions on the basis of ethnic background, allotted certain rights to members of these various ethnic groups.

Partly in this context, young Muhajirs in Karachi and Hyderabad mobilized themselves on the basis of a new Muhajir identity from the late 1970s onwards. They became the most vocal of those groups which have not been willing to identify which one of the four recognized ethnic groups. In 1978, the All Pakistan Muhajir Student Organization (APMSO) was formed, followed in 1984 by the Muhajir Qaumi Movement (MQM). The MQM has since then made headlines in both the Pakistani and international press as it has been a major player in the dramatic increase of ethnic polarization and violence in urban Sindh. It is a movement with many different faces. From an academic standpoint, it is movement of remarkable social mobilization based on a rare perception of ethnicity as the MQM does not claim a separate ethnic identity for Muhajirs on the basis of a shared homeland but rather on the basis of a shared experience in exodus and migration. For many of its supporters, the MQM is a revolutionary movement which has given voice to large sections of the underprivileged population of Karachi and Hyderabad. Its critics associate the party mainly with armed terror, ethnic discrimination, nepotism and crime. The party, which has won elections in urban Sindh with large margins since 1987, has seriously suffered from an internal split in 1991, and even more from attempts of various governments to break the back of the party's street power in a series of so-called *Operations Clean-up*, which have been criticized by human rights commissions for the extrajudicial methods which were reportedly being employed.

Corruption and violence

In the neighborhood where I did fieldwork, the experiences people have with state functionaries clearly do not meet their expectations. Expectations are based on the ideal of an impartial, transparent, autonomous state, which, as a benevolent and just parent, rules over society. That is the norm - the way things should be. In practice, however, that ideal is felt to be constantly corrupted by dishonest and insincere state functionaries with which the people of the neighborhood have to deal daily. As Gupta also observes in his northern Indian village, there is a profound discrepancy between expectations of

the state and everyday experiences with local state functionaries, a discrepancy which serves as the basis of a discourse of popular protest and resistance.

Most residents of my neighborhood - all of them are Muhajirs - subscribe to the legitimacy of state authority. In this respect, they consider themselves different from, for instance, the Pathans in the mountainous North, who, as a tribal people, are said to be an unruly, unpredictable lot who do not recognize the authority of the state. Notwithstanding the fact that Pathans are to some extent admired for their proverbial sense of independence, they are also condemned for their tribal laws, and especially the custom of blood feud, which are seen as evidence of an unislamic and backward mentality and a violation of both the *shari'at* and the constitution. Very often the discourse of modernity is being used in this respect: the tribal laws are said to belong to a past which educated people have left behind. These traditional laws, based on exclusivist loyalties of tribe and family, should now be replaced by the impartiality of the *shari'at* and the bureaucratic laws of the modern nation-state. Moreover, as Muhajirs, who claim to have left their homelands in India for the ideal of Pakistan, the residents of the neighborhood feel that they have profoundly contributed to the establishment of Pakistan, which was expected to make real the ideals of Muslim unity and social equality and put an end to particularistic solidarities and traditional law systems. Generally speaking, the residents identify the state as an agent of modernity and reform and hold that Muhajirs - as an educated people and a people who went through the chastening, if not purifying, experience of exodus - are especially equipped to understand and promote the ideals of Islam and modernity. Their everyday talk is full of condemnations of the identified antipoles of modernity, not only tribal laws, but also 'Sufism', 'feudalism', and caste and kinship loyalties.

Although always softened by an ideology of Muslim unity and national solidarity, the idea that Muhajirs are the champions, if not the chosen people, of Pakistan regularly pops up and it most often comes with a feeling of solitude and displacement, of having been betrayed and left in the cold by the other peoples of Pakistan who have bartered away the ideals of Pakistan for their regional or ethnic interests. The personal experience of migration and the stories which are told about this within the family and the neighborhood have always been linked to the national experience of independence and, subsequently, the building up from scratch of Pakistan. The sacrifices, which are said to have been made by Muhajirs, have never been properly appreciated. On the contrary, the state, once established, has been conquered and barricaded by others who are less receptive of the liberating ideals of Islamic modernism.

With such arguments, people in the neighborhood evaluate and talk about their daily dealings with local state officials. Very few of them work in state institutions, although some work as policemen or other low-grade civil servants, and most of them look at state institutions as impenetrable bastions. It is generally considered a waste of time and energy to apply for a job in the civil service unless you are willing and able to pay a bribe as high as approximately one year's salary. Further, the implementation of governmental development schemes - legalization of illegal housing, construction of sewerage systems, etc - depends on personal contacts or high bribes and takes a frustratingly long time. The police in particular is considered untrustworthy, hostile and

humiliating. When in trouble, stay away from the police if you do not want more problems. Nevertheless, it is not always possible to avoid the police, which regularly set up check-points to relieve passers-by of their money and valuables.

Over the past few years, corruption has become a major theme in political debates - not only on a popular level, but also in newspapers, on TV and in the national assembly. Prime ministers are usually dismissed on the charge of corruption: Muhammad Khan Junejo in 1988, Benazir Bhutto in 1990 and 1996, Nawaz Sharif in 1993 and 1999. In November 1996, after Bhutto had been dismissed, a major operation was launched by the interim government to overcome corruption. With great fanfare, an Accountability (*Ehtasab*) Commission was installed which would check the bank accounts of every major politician and bureaucrat on corruption. During the same period, Pakistan appeared as second-best on some international list of most corrupt countries, which became a popular topic of public debates and jokes. Some said that it was to be Pakistan's tragic fate never to be the first in anything, while others countered that Pakistan had initially been on the top of the list, but then some government official had bribed the makers of the list to persuade them to put some African state first. Meanwhile, the national television network daily reported on the findings of the Ehtasab Commission, showing the Ehtasab Commissioner behind a huge account of documents piled up on his desk, or solemnly talking with the President of high court judges against the background of high-rank uniformed soldiers. It created the illusion that the corruption and nepotism were not an intrinsic part of state power but, on the contrary, a foreign, if contagious and dangerous, disease that had affected many a state body and which was now being fought with all the power the state could muster. Interestingly, the Ehtasab Commission itself has since then become subject of controversy and allegations of political intrigue, but although this has affected the accountability of yet another state institution, it has hardly damaged the belief in the possibility of a transparent and impartial state as such. It has, however, seriously added to a general public distrust in politicians and bureaucrats, who are commonly believed to 'eat your brain' (*dimag khana*) with hollow phrases of Islam and national solidarity while ruthlessly exploiting the common or poor people (*am log, gharib log*).

The popular perception of the state is not only shaped by corruption, but also by violence and humiliation. According to the neighborhood residents, state violence has become salient and more brutal since the 1970s. This includes everyday instances of harassment by the police, but also more violent state persecution of potential militants of the MQM. Backed by massive propaganda which depicts the series of Operations Clean-up as battles against 'terrorists' funded by foreign enemies such as India, state forces have killed a large number of MQM militants in what the press commonly defines as 'police encounters'. At times, the army has proudly, almost as a trophy, published the monthly number of *dacoits* (bandits) it had shot dead. Several newspapers and magazines have published critical stories about these practices together with pictures of maimed bodies. Further, the youth of the neighborhood tells each other stories about peers who have been arrested and put in jail, where they are reportedly raped, urinated upon, made to squat for prolonged periods of time and otherwise humiliated.

Despite these experiences and rumors, the people in the neighborhood have not lost their belief in the ideal of a just and impartial state altogether. They have rather found explanations which ascribe the moral rot to particular groups of people which are said to corrupt the ideal in a concealed manner according to secret deals and hidden loyalties. One of these explanations hinges on the presence of intelligence agencies. A second builds upon the notion of ethnic exclusivism.

Popular explanations of corruption: intelligence agencies and ethnicity

A great deal of political rumor in Hyderabad is about *agencies*. Intelligence agencies are believed to be the real rulers of Pakistan, the secret manipulators of politics. They are believed to be omnipresent and to some extent that even seems true. This was brought home to me one day when a friend told me that he had been visited by a man who had identified himself as an agent of the Inter Service Intelligence (ISI), the army's intelligence agency. The man had asked about my doings in Hyderabad. The best way to get rid of him, my friend suggested, was to casually inform the right persons about the harmless character of my research. The way to do this was to make a tour around the city to visit anybody likely to be an ISI informer in order to drink a cup of tea, have a chat and leave a good impression. It took us a couple of days inside travel agencies, petrol stations, post offices, tea stalls and restaurants, shrines, offices of lawyers and NGO's, the Press Club and several shops and workshops in the bazar. Most intriguing of this limited study was to find out that the identity of intelligence agents was known to, or at least suspected by, a large number of people. When I returned to the neighborhood of my fieldwork with the exciting idea that I had qualified information to tell, it appeared that most informers I had been drinking tea with were already known there.

I do not want to suggest that Pakistan is at par with the state of Rumania prior to the 1989 revolution in which, as Katherine Verdery (1996) describes, an astonishing large percentage of the population was involved in secret intelligence work, but I am convinced that intelligence agencies are an established aspect of Pakistani politics and that the ISI is not the only such agency operating in Pakistan. In fact, several law and order forces run their own agency and they often appear to be interested in each other as much as in anybody else. This also means that the state cannot be regarded as a Big Brother, spying on its subjects through secret activities penetrating private places and thereby effectively keeping society under its thumb. It rather resembles a troubled, fragmented family of several brothers who are deeply distrustful of each other and cannot rely too much on each other in their dealings with the outside world. Partly for this reason I think that the influence of the intelligence agencies should not be exaggerated, even though there is little doubt that the ISI in particular is an important player in Pakistani politics.

Nevertheless, many wild speculations can be heard about their supposedly far-reaching power. Almost all major political developments are regularly ascribed to the secret manipulation of 'the agencies' - a category that usually remains unspecified. Large-scale riots are often believed to be masterminded by 'the agencies'. This also goes for remarkable election results. It is commonly believed that 'the agencies' work for

particular economic, political and military elites which try to defend their 'vested interests' through a policy of divide and rule. The idea is that the ideals of Pakistan - social equality, Muslim unity, the abolition of feudalism, etc - would harm their position, but since they cannot openly declare their unpatriotic conservatism, they need secret agencies to spread hatred and distrust among the common people of Pakistan. In this way, the problems that pester Pakistan - poverty, corruption, ethnic polarization - are seen to be the result of the wheelings and dealings of a happy few who are in control of the secret niches of the Pakistani state, rather than of inequalities in social relations, as well as ethnic or religious prejudices, which are deeply ingrained in society at large.

Comparatively speaking, this discourse on intelligence agencies is rather optimistic and less dangerous than the other explanation for state corruption which revolves around ethnic competition. Compared to the ethnic discourse, arguments about the prevailing power of intelligence agencies put the blame on an almost invisible and unidentifiable enemy. According to this talk, different social groups within Pakistani society would live peacefully together if it were not for the dividing scheming of unknown intelligence agents. In contrast, the argument of ethnic differences potentially blames anyone who belongs to the rival ethnic group.

In the introduction of this chapter I have already sketched the contents of the argument about Punjabi *biradari* solidarity. Punjabis, however, are not the only ethnic group which is said to have captured and polluted the state by unpatriotic and unislamic means. In a slightly different argument, Muhajirs also accuse Sindhis of dominating the state through traditional and backward forms of loyalty which damage national solidarity. If Punjabis are condemned for their exclusivist kinship mentality, Sindhis are considered an inveterately feudal people. The Sindhi way towards domination is through the vertical networks of feudal patronage headed by either a landlord (*wadera*) or a spiritual leader (*pir*). These rural big men are primarily blamed for the prevailing 'feudalism' that is said to continue to dominate Pakistani politics and that is especially believed to characterize the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), which is led by the Sindhi landlord family of the Bhuttos. The ordinary Sindhi, however, is not considered to be free of guilt either. He is said to be of a lazy, unmanly, submissive and superstitious disposition, which does not befit a modern Pakistani citizen. In a gesture of welcome he puts his hands before his chest like a Hindu instead of offering a fellow Muslim his right hand. He bows in front of his master. He begs rather than demands. Some residents in my neighborhood also said that the Sindhi prefers fish for dinner rather than meat and that this disputable taste symbolizes his fishy, unreliable, deeply 'feudal' character.

It would be an interesting study to trace down the genealogy of such ideas. I am not in the position to do this, but it is clear that negative images of the backward Sindhi Muslim - the Sindhi Hindu, in contrast, has a reputation of an energetic and efficient money-lender and trader - were already circulating in northern India during colonial times. From cities like Delhi, Lucknow and Agra, the Sindh looked like an uncivilized backwater and an unhealthy wilderness of extreme heat, dangerous animals, strange diseases, mad mullahs and fanatical faqirs. Such notions were also promoted in colonial writings. There are many examples of this, but the most well-known is probably Sir

Richard Burton's travel accounts. In an early work, Burton wrote that 'the dark complexion of the Sindhi points him out an instance of arrested development.... He is idle and apathetic, unclean in his person, and addicted to toxication; notoriously cowardly in times of danger, and proportionally insolent when he has nothing to fear; he has no idea of truth or probity, and only wants more talent to be a model of treachery' (Burton 1988: 283-4). To be fair, Burton did make an exception for the Sindhi woman. In a later work, which also contains a chapter entitled *The Sindhi man - his character, and especially what he drinks* and which was recently reprinted by the Department of Culture and Tourism of the Government of Sindh, Burton describes the Sindhi woman's attitude as 'not ungraceful, she carries herself well, she never stoops and, observe, she has high but not round shoulders' (Burton 1993: 328).

Although informed by older, pre-independence traditions of prejudice, it is clear that popular images of a state captured by a backward ethnic group to a large extent follow the discourse of modernity and tradition as it has been promoted by the mostly urban elites which have considerably shaped the process of state formation and nation-building in Pakistan. In the popular imagination, we see a similar notion of a reforming state fighting the evils of traditions, such as feudalism, superstition, or - in the case of the anti-Punjabi argument - a too exclusivist kinship solidarity. From a national perspective, such traditional mentalities have always been depicted as the trait of particular ethnic groups. In the hands of underprivileged social groups, such as the Muhajir shoemakers and rickshaw drivers in the neighborhood of my fieldwork, such ideas are appropriated to lay bare the hypocrisy of the privileged state of society. These notions feed into a sense of betrayal and displacement so pivotal to present-day Muhajir identity.

A geography of secret state power

The captive state, then, is seen as the true, but hidden, image of power that is concealed by empty words about bureaucratic transparency, Muslim fraternity and self-effacing patriotism. It is important to realize that the hypocrisy that is considered self-evident and for everyone to see is at the same time said to take place within a domain of secrecy that cannot bear the light of day. It is in this sense that the image of the captive state contributes to the reproduction of a separate Muhajir identity. It is not simply the fact that corruption, nepotism and abuse of power have rendered talk about the impartiality of the state meaningless - a development that has been going on for several years and is now accepted as, indeed, a fact by probably most Pakistani citizens or, for that matter, most foreign observers. More importantly, such practices are said to take place in an atmosphere of secrecy and conspiracy of which the common people (*am log*) are excluded. This sense of exclusion from what actually and rightfully belongs to the nation - a notion that in the hands of Muhajirs has an ethnic as well as a class component - is an important theme in present-day Muhajir identity.

It is, of course, well-known that secrets, rumors and gossip can be important means of communication through which to establish a sense of community or loyalty. From the theoretical works of Simmel (1950) and Goffman (1959) to, for instance, a recent

study of ethnic conflict in South-Senegal (De Jong 2000), we find the notion that secrets must first be identified as secrets to become secrets at all. Secondly, secrecy creates a community of people who are 'in the know' as opposed to the ignorant, who are therefore outsiders. In this way, a secret - regardless of its contents - may become the glue that binds a group together. But secrecy can also generate insiders and outsiders in a different way by creating the fiction of a secret syndicate that controls and penetrates society through covert means. Rumors about freemasonry or a worldwide Jewish conspiracy are historical examples.

In Hyderabad, secrecy and the communication of rumors worked both ways. On the one hand, rumors about intelligence agencies or invisible *biradari* or *feudal* networks depicted opponents as scheming conspirators connected through traditional and less than transparent networks which are anathema to the ideals of a free, democratic, Muslim nation-state. On the other hand, however, such rumors were seldomly communicated openly. Although everyone was aware of the existence of such rumors to the point that they can rightly be called public secrets, most of my informants took care to contribute to the notion of secrecy by first creating a conspirational atmosphere before telling me what I had already been told a thousand times. At a minimum, one would lower one's voice, take me by the arm and look at me significantly to indicate that the words to come were both valuable and dangerous. Other people were not content with this and would propose to retreat into unlikely places such as airconditioned restaurants, which had the additional advantages of coolness and expensive beverages, to put me in the know. Two places were especially favored for this purpose. One was a poorly lit restaurant on one of Hyderabad's main streets, owned by a well-known man, who himself had a reputation of being close to the secret center of things. He had been a candidate in local elections in the 1970s and had spent brief periods in jail for his political activities. In those days, the restaurant had been a meeting place of politically active students. Since his retreat from active politics, the owner usually sat outside the restaurant, mostly accompanied by one of his former friends and *comrades*. Inside, the fans on the ceiling were ramshackle enough to make plenty of noise so that private conversations could not be overheard.

The other place was a coffee house, equally centrally located and also known as a place where radical politicians, students, journalists and - also - intelligence agents met. Like the airconditioned restaurant, it maintained a reputation as a place of rumors and secret knowledge. Amazingly, then, to exchange secrets, my informants would often propose to go to places which made one suspected by just being there. These places served as identified hotbeds of classified information. Being seen there to some extent made one feel involved in the secret center of local politics. It gave these places, which would also include certain shrines of Sufi saints, the Press Club compound or students' hostels, a certain awe. In addition, they were characterized by an anonymity that went well with the rumors that were being exchanged. They were typically without an author. They rather came from nowhere in particular but were believed by everybody.

These places, then, formed a geography of power complementary to the prestigious and often colonial architecture of official state buildings, such as the court buildings, the head office of the police or the army bungalows in the lush Cantonment area.

Considered the dark workshops of local politics, they were not only seen as places where conspirators would meet, but also where the secret bodies of the state gathered information, bribed informants and hired people for illegal activities. If conspiracies were masterminded within the drawing-rooms of Punjabi *biradaris* or the residences of Sindhi *feudal* lords, they were believed to be carried out in the workshops of covert state power where one could find the people willing to do the dirty work. On visits to such places, my informants would never fail to point out to me the men who had been involved in spying activities.

It is not my intention to argue that rumors about covert networks of power and illegal state activities stem from collective fantasies which have no basis in actual facts. On the contrary, intelligence agencies do play an important role in Pakistani politics just as *biradari* and patronage networks continue to be important. However, the atmosphere of secrecy in which such activities are discussed makes it possible to overestimate their influence. Probably the most well-known example of this is the contention that the army through the illegal and hidden activities of the ISI is responsible for the rise of the MQM. This is a rumor that has become a widely accepted fact among the critics of the MQM. The idea is that the military regime in the mid-1980s needed a popular political party in the province of Sindh to curb the power of the Pakistan People's Party, the regime's main opponent. While it is possible that the ISI has had some dealings with the MQM in its early years, it seems rather farfetched to make the army responsible for the massive popular support the party subsequently received. The argument contributes to the notion of an omnipresent, all-powerful state that may produce popular movements wherever it wishes. Such rumors thus reinforce the notion of a state that is both separated from society as well as capable of manipulating society totally. Without wishing to belittle the force that state officials can mobilize through both overt and covert means, it is also clear that the rise of such popular movements as headed by the MQM are, among other things, forms of protest against state crime and corruption rather than the planned outcome of state manipulation. Rumors that make the ISI responsible for the movement, however, enable one to close one's eyes for the complex changes that are going on in society at large and that offer much more plausible, if alarming, explanations for ethnic conflict. Instead, they enable one to interpret the crisis as a crisis of the state alone. By way of epilogue, I will say a few words about this tendency to explain complex social transformations solely in terms of a crisis of governability.

Conclusion

A very influential, almost commonsensical, theory of the state explains the recent rise of political violence and social unrest in Pakistan in terms of a 'crisis of governability' or a 'collapse of state power' (e.g. Nasr 1992). According to a widely held public opinion, the trouble is caused by a decay of political institutions and an erosion of state authority. When the state loses its grip on society, the subjects according to an almost Hobbesian logic will take care of their interests in a chaotic and opportunistic manner. In Pakistan, it is often recalled that the most violent episodes in the history of Pakistan

occurred during the collapse of an authoritarian military regime, be it at the late 1960s or the late 1980s. Democratic regimes, it is argued, are weaker and less willing or capable to maintain law and order through violent means.

I have difficulties with these assumptions. Surely it is difficult to maintain that the Pakistani state has become a weak state in the 1990s. A large number of heavily armed military, para-military, and police forces have been brought out into the streets of Karachi and Hyderabad since the late 1980s. I am not so sure that the transition to democracy since 1988, an arrested process since the coup of 1999, lowered the readiness of government leaders to use force against civilians. All the same, it is possible to argue that the state is increasingly characterized by fragmentation. Various state institutions are constantly in competition with each other. The most dramatic expression of this are the violent confrontations between police forces and the military which took place in a number of incidents (Verkaaik 1999: ch. 7). Much of this is the result of the fact that new administrations often establish new governmental bodies and law-and-order forces and man them with known allies, rather than work with, or try to rearrange, existing institutions manned by civil servants whose loyalty is doubtful. In this way, social and political rivalry is firmly established within the state apparatus, but that does in no way imply that these various state institutions are less willing or capable of using effective force.

Rather than looking at the state as an autonomous, unified and monitoring agency, then, it appears more fruitful to study the state as a particular part of society that is characterized by a relatively high degree of political activities, including competition over resources, exchange of information, ideological debates, and the use of physical coercion. One should not merely look for causes of this increasing fragmentation of the state in the state apparatus itself, but rather take it as a reflection of a more far-reaching transition of society at large. To paraphrase Sandria Freitag, who has made a similar argument in the case of India, present-day social unrest and political violence are symptoms of 'a much larger and more challenging process under way: the redefinition of Pakistani civil social space and who will be allowed to participate publicly inside that discursive space' (Freitag 1996: 232). In other words, the argument that social unrest is caused by a collapse of state authority fails to acknowledge two important facts. It firstly accepts the idea of a separation between state and society while there is no evidence that such a strict separation exists outside the domain of the political imagination. Secondly, it reduces social unrest to a crisis of the state whereas it is an expression of changes which are taking place in a much larger part of society.

In this article, then, I have tried to initiate a more integrated approach of studying present-day relations between state and society in Pakistan by looking at the state 'from below', that is, by examining popular perception of the state within an 'ethnic' group that has been at the heart of social transitions and political unrest in urban Sindh since the mid-1980s. Building upon the work of Eickelman & Piscatori, I have argued that the popular imagination of the state is linked to a modernist concept of Islamic nationalism so that the state came to be regarded as the leading agent of religious and social reform. This notion of the state as a benevolent parent was itself based on the myth of the state as separated from and impartial to society. In turn, this ideal of the

state have become the basis for a popular critique of state practice. Expecting the impossible, namely a truly transparent and democratic state sincerely devoted to the ideals of Muslim fraternity, Muhajirs have grown deeply disappointed with and distrustful of the state, which they feel fails to live up to its own high standards. Instead of reforming a backward tradition, the state has been captured by social groups who through secret and invisible means hold on to their particularistic sense of loyalty and use state power to enhance their self-interests. The growing attention of the theme of corruption within Pakistan must therefore be seen primarily as a sign of emancipation rather than an increase of immoral behavior among state officials. The practices now increasingly labelled as corruption are not new. What is new, is the growing sense of indignation about these practices within Pakistani society.

References

Abrams, Philip

1988 Notes on the difficulty of studying the state, in *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 1/1: 58-89.

Ahmad, Muneer

1964 *The civil servant in Pakistan: a study of the background and attitudes of public servants in Lahore*, Karachi: Oxford University Press.

Burton, Richard F.

1988 *Sindh and the races that inhabit the valley of the Indus*, reprint of [1851], Karachi: Indus Publishers.

1993 *Sind revisited*, reprint of [1877], Karachi: Department of Culture and Tourism, Government of Sindh.

Eickelman, Dale F. & Piscatori, James

1996 *Muslim Politics*, Princeton: University Press.

Ewing, Katherine P.

1983 The politics of Sufism: redefining the saints of Pakistan, in *Journal of Asian Studies*, XLII(2): 251-68.

1997 *Arguing sainthood: modernity, psychoanalysis, and Islam*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Freitag, Sandria

1996 Contesting in public: colonial legacies and contemporary communalism, in David Ludden (ed.), *Contesting the nation: religion, community, and the politics of democracy in India*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania: 211-34.

- Gilmartin, David
1988 *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the making of Pakistan*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Goffman, Erving
1959 *The presentation of self in everyday life*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- Gupta, Akhil
1995 Blurred boundaries: the discourse of corruption, the culture of politics, and the imagined state, in *American Ethnologist*, 22(2): 375-402.
- Jalal, Ayesha
1995 *Democracy and authoritarianism in South Asia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- de Jong, Ferdinand
2000 *The power of secrecy: performance and the politics of locality in Casamance, Senegal*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Amsterdam.
- Mitchell, Timothy
1991 The limits of the state: beyond statist approaches and their critics, in *American Political Science Review*, 85/1: 77-96.
- Nasr, Seyyed Vali Reza
1992 Democracy and the crisis of governability in Pakistan, in *Asian Survey*, XXXII/6, 521-37.
- Simmel, Georg
1950 The secret and the secret society, in *The sociology of Georg Simmel*, translated and edited by K.H. Wolff, New York: The Free Press: 307-76.
- Verdery, Katherine
1996 *What was socialism, and what comes next?*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Verkaaik, Oskar
1999 *Inside the citadel: fun, violence, and religious nationalism in Hyderabad, Pakistan*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Amsterdam.
- Werbner, Pnina & Basu, Helene
1998 *Embodying charisma: modernity, locality and the performance of emotion in Sufi cults*, London: Routledge.