



**HAL**  
open science

## Book Review: *Alix Philippon, Soufisme et politique au Pakistan: Le mouvement barelwi à l'heure de la 'guerre contre le terrorisme'*

Julien Levesque

► **To cite this version:**

Julien Levesque. Book Review: *Alix Philippon, Soufisme et politique au Pakistan: Le mouvement barelwi à l'heure de la 'guerre contre le terrorisme'*. *South Asia Research*, 2015, pp.140-142. 10.1177/0262728014561078 . hal-01916986

**HAL Id: hal-01916986**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01916986>**

Submitted on 3 Feb 2020

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

By focusing on the political activities of Barelwi groups, this study blurs the lines of neatly delineated categories that tend to pin a 'bad' Deobandi Islam, associated with terrorism, the Taliban and al-Qaeda, against a 'good' Barelwi Islam, seen as a proponent of tolerant Sufism. The author argues that between Sufism and Islamism exists a 'grey zone' (*zone de grisé*, p. 298), in which certain Barelwi groups explicitly claim a Sufi identity as a register for Islamist mobilisation (p. 18). Far from excluding one another, then, here Sufism and Islamism are seen to work hand in hand.

The first part of the book traces the lineage of the Barelwi movement, which initially sought to safeguard Islam as practised by the majority in South Asia, a religiosity centred around the shrines of saints, according a central place to *pirs* as intercessors to God. Born in colonial India as a religious movement, the Barelwi school of thought gradually adopted a political posture by supporting the Muslim League. Philippon details the political mobilisation of Barelwis in independent Pakistan through their principal political organisation: the Jamiyat-e Ulama Pakistan (JUP), led by its founder, Shah Ahmad Nurani. The final period of the Barelwi movement's political development spans from the 1980s onwards and sees the emergence of new Barelwi actors, such as the Minhaj-ul-Quran (MUQ), the Dawaat-e Islami, the Sunni Tehreek and the Almi Tanzeem Ahl-e Sunnat.

The second part of the book describes the inner functioning of some Barelwi groups, focusing successively on the defence of a Sufi identity and on the construction of charisma and authority within these groups. The Sufi identity that Barelwi groups intend to defend revolves around 'anti-Wahhabi' and 'anti-Deobandi' rhetoric, along with a vehement devotion to Prophet Muhammad and Sufi saints, notably Abdul Qadir Gilani. To show how authority is constructed and perpetuated within Barelwi groups, Philippon focuses on the MUQ and its founder and leader, Tahir ul-Qadri, who enjoys a personality cult based on his identification with Prophet Muhammad and on a relationship with members of the organisation similar to that of a *murshid* (Sufi *shaikh*) to his *murid* (followers), despite the leader's own insistence on not being a *pir* himself (pp. 161–2, 195). [141]

The third and final part of the book focuses on the last period identified by the author, from the 1980s onwards, to take a closer look at the variety of Barelwi groups and their evolution. While the JUP declined in popularity, in part due to Zia ul-Haq's pro-Deobandi Islamisation policies, the emergence of the armed pressure group, Sunni Tehreek, as a political platform and the promotion of a 'democratic Islamism' by the Pakistan Awami Tehreek, the political arm of the MUQ, renewed the presence of Barelwis in the political arena. After 9/11, Barelwis enjoyed a new-found—though long-awaited—legitimacy as 'pacific' Sufi groups. Barelwi groups rode this wave, denouncing the 'Talibanisation' of Pakistan (p. 285). Philippon points to the fact that the conjunction between the official ideologisation of Sufism and the radicalisation led by groups perceived as anti-Sufi provided Barelwis with an incomparable window of opportunity (p. 267).

One of the major interests of this insightful study lies in deconstructing the common quietist image of Sufism, by showing that the religious ideology of Sufism can be reified as an identity marker by socio-political groups. In this process, a certain set of principles, beliefs and practices gets defined as 'true'

Sufism, laying the ground for sectarian antagonism that can lead to further violence. The attempts by the Musharraf government, in the wake of 9/11, to promote Sufism as an alternative ideology to Islamism (p. 267) proceeded on a similar reification: the 'National Sufi Council' was indeed made to promote a symbolic, 'mascot Islam' (p. 269) embodied in Sufism. Philippon's work thus refutes the idea that violent Islamism could simply be countered by empowering those who claim to represent Sufism, as among those representatives, proponents of violence also figure.

While her work is informative in its study of Barelwi groups and refreshing in its attempt to deconstruct clichés about Sufism, the author attempts to forge yet another rigid category, Sufislamism. If, in the case of Barelwis, reality proved more complex than scholarly categories, the same will likely happen to Sufislamism. Philippon seemingly conceives Sufislamism as a concept that fills a gap, or a niche, in the spectrum of totalising categories that portray Sufism and Islamism as opposed to one another (p. 14). However, the author's claim of coining a concept to better describe reality stands somewhat at odds with her attempts to show the limits of usual classifications.

This study of Barelwi groups would have benefited from more contextualisation and theoretical grounding, particularly with regard to the theory of mobilisation and the anthropology of religion. In several instances, this leads the author to assert rather than demonstrate. For example, the concept of 'distribution of spiritual goods' (pp. 185–7) is used with little explanation, leaving unclear how it helps understand what the author observed. In spite of detailed observation on the MUQ, the book fails to convincingly explain the superposition of Sufi dogma and practices onto relations of power, which imply both charisma and clientelism. Moreover, after a reference in the introduction to *pir zamindars* who incarnate both spiritual and temporal power, the reader is left without further contextualisation on the social fabric of Pakistan [142] in which Barelwi groups evolve. For instance, the question whether certain Barelwi parties find more support in rural or urban areas is left ignored, despite the deep ethnic polarisation in Sindh, where most of the urban population is not Sindhi speaking. In addition to life stories, a depiction of the ethnic profile of Barelwi activists would have added great value to the study.

Nevertheless, Philippon's work greatly documents Barelwi groups in Pakistan and helps reconsider the relation between Sufism and political Islam by highlighting the sectarian mobilisation that can be made in its name. It will, therefore, be of interest to students of Pakistan and of political uses of Sufism.

**Julien Levesque**

*PhD candidate, CEIAS-EHESS, Paris*