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# Mashal Saif. *The 'Ulama in Contemporary Pakistan: Contesting and Cultivating an Islamic Republic*

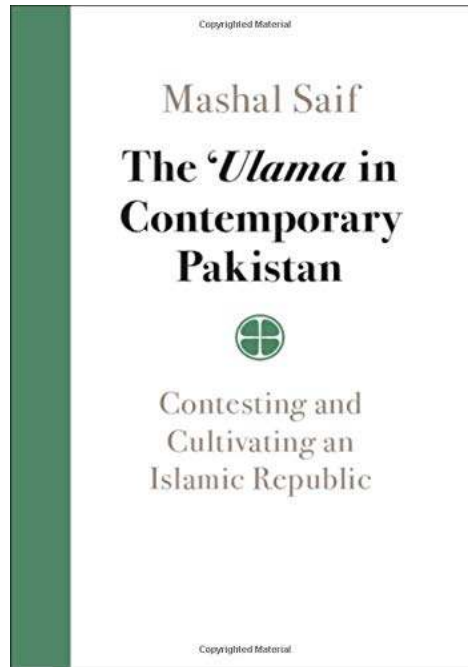
Paul Rollier

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Mashal Saif. 2021. *The 'Ulama in Contemporary Pakistan: Contesting and Cultivating an Islamic Republic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 350 pages.

- 1 Although an Islamic republic, Pakistan is



not run by clerics. The state, however, is mandated to uphold its self-proclaimed Islamic identity by ensuring that no laws are “repugnant” to Islam. This has enabled religious scholars, the *ulema* (sing. *alim*), together with Islamist parties, to contest the authority of the state on religious matters and, for the last four decades, to push for the enactment of some *sharia* norms into law. State institutions such as the Council of Islamic Ideology have facilitated the partial islamization of the law. This project was, to a large extent, dictated by political expediency, allowing Pakistan’s governing elites to legitimize their claim to power by endowing the state with an Islamic veneer. Alternatively co-opted and marginalized by successive governments, the *ulema* commonly deplore the state’s opportunistic use of Islam and its failure to take resolute steps towards “enabl[ing] the Muslims of Pakistan ... to order their lives in accordance with the fundamental principles ... of Islam,” as stated in the constitution (art. 31). Suspicious of the country’s secularizing elites, and challenged by a profusion of actors that claim to speak authoritatively for Islam, the *ulema* have sought alternative avenues to advocate for Islamic laws and the creation of an Islamic state. The last decade in particular has seen the emergence of assertive *ulema* that have demonstrated formidable street power by mobilizing the masses around the issue of blasphemy. These colossal protests are illustrative of the ways in which the *ulema*, despite their difficulty in winning parliamentary seats, can influence state policy and set the parameters of public discourse on Islam.

- 2 Combining fieldwork interviews and archival research, *The 'Ulama in Contemporary Pakistan* focuses on these Islamic religious scholars, their relationship with the state, and their views of what an Islamic state would look like. Mashal Saif, an assistant professor of religion at Clemson University, offers a compelling reminder that far from defending a unified view on the definition of Islam and the ideal place of *sharia* in the state, Pakistan’s *ulema* conceive of and engage with the state in a variety of ways. This study is a welcome addition to the existing literature on the *ulema* in Pakistan (e.g. Fuchs 2019; Sajjad 2018; Zaman 2002), as well as to broader debates about how *ulema*’s

authority, as traditional experts of Islamic law and theology, has been reconfigured with the advent of the modern nation-state, expanding mass education and new forms of media.

- 3 The book is grounded on a study of *ulema's* intellectual production (*fatwas*, journals, books and pamphlets), as well as on interviews conducted with a number of prominent *ulema* in Punjab. Saif vividly documents her difficulties, as a female researcher with ties to the US, to be taken seriously by her interlocutors and to gain access to their mosques and seminaries. But she also notes how being a woman facilitated her entry into their homes, allowing her to spend time with their wives and daughters.
- 4 In its five chapters, *The 'Ulama in Contemporary Pakistan* takes up a range of topics pertaining to *ulema*-state relations, including the work of Pakistan's Council of Islamic Ideology, recent debates on the blasphemy laws, and sectarian conflict. The central thesis is that Pakistani *ulema's* relationship to the state is "best understood as a process of both contestation and cultivation of the Islamic Republic" (p. 18). Though they challenge the state's claim to be properly Islamic, Saif contends, the *ulema* are immersed in its language and conceptual categories. By pressuring it to adopt or extend existing Islamic laws, the *ulema* are submitting to its logic and strictures, thereby "cultivating" the state without necessarily realizing it. Saif does not document the practical modalities of interaction between the *ulema* and state institutions. Instead, she seeks to assess the extent to which the imperatives of the modern nation-state represent an epistemic and normative challenge to religious scholars whose worldviews and expertise rest on a sustained engagement with Islamic traditions and its premodern precedents.
- 5 The author proposes to see the state not so much as an institutional apparatus as a realm of political imagination. This perspective, informed by the now canonical ideas of Foucault, Agamben and Schmitt on sovereignty, leads her to argue that Pakistani citizens "produce and perpetuate" the idea of the state (p. 211). Treated primarily as a discursive reality, the state is largely abstracted from social relations and from Pakistan's distinctive political economy, be it the entrenchment of patronage or the imbalance between elected and unelected institutions. And when an interviewee alludes to the supremacy of the "establishment"—a term generally used as a euphemism for Pakistan's military and intelligence agencies—, the author glosses it univocally as "the West" and shies from contextualizing state-citizen relations (p. 145). Exploring what she calls the "capacious" and "imagined" qualities of the state certainly offers heuristic insights, but one is left wondering how precisely the state comes to exist in the lives of the *ulema*. For instance, recent scholarship on the state of Pakistan have stressed the role of semiotic technologies and affect in the production and distribution of state power (e.g. Ali 2019; Hull 2012; Rashid 2020). Giving a sense of the ordinary ways in which the *ulema* and their institutions interact with bureaucrats and officials could have allowed a more nuanced appreciation of their political theologies and state-making practices. Notwithstanding these reservations, Saif's book is a useful reminder of the hegemony of the nation-state as a space of political imagination outside of which no vision of worldly sovereignty is deemed possible. Even—and this is key to Saif's argument—for individuals speaking from within the Islamic tradition.
- 6 The author rightly points out that "the state's self-declared Islamic identity allow[s] the clerics to fault it for not upholding Islamic values" (p. 61). What is possibly missing here is an appreciation of how the *ulema's* mode of engaging the state may be evolving. For

the *ulema*, holding the state to account and shaping government policy on Islam might increasingly be contingent upon the skillful orchestration of street protests and dexterity in the use of social media. Although a chapter is dedicated to the issue of blasphemy in the context of Taseer's murder and its aftermath,<sup>1</sup> the author does not explicate whether and how the pervasiveness of the language of blasphemy is transforming the *ulema's* relationship to religious authority and state power.

- 7 A central mode of inquiry in the book consists in teasing out apparent contradictions, for instance, the fact that Shia *ulema* criticize the state for its Sunni bias and its failure to protect Shia co-religionists, while simultaneously pressing for state protection. Similarly, the author is surprised to find that an *alim* working for the state's Council of Islamic Ideology views the state's profession of Islamicity as a travesty (p. 145). A number of anthropologists, however, note that it is not uncommon for Pakistani Muslims to engage critically or even with skepticism with various voices that claim to speak for Islam (e.g. Khan 2012). Moreover, even individuals who aspire to lead pious lives may harbor ambivalence and contradictory convictions, or draw on distinct registers of thought as they move from one social context to another (Schielke 2015). One such puzzle identified by the author is the way in which the *ulema* occasionally "anthropomorphize" the state by likening it to an individual—as if it were a Muslim who failed to live up to the exigencies of Islam—, while still recognizing it as an institutional apparatus. Saif elucidates this by stating that the *ulema* are engaged in a process of "cultural translation," drawing on normative Islamic concepts to apprehend the modern state, understood primarily with reference to its western origins (p. 182). At times, the recurrent contrast drawn between Islamic tradition and western modernity tends to confer a stable essence to each of these terms, thereby obscuring how these fields can be mutually constitutive, and how the boundaries of religion and politics were profoundly reworked during and after the colonial period. Saif's account of the *ulema* anthropomorphizing the state is nevertheless insightful and evocative. This analysis would perhaps have benefitted from a discussion of the resonances between this "anthropomorphic state" and the *ulema's* practice of analogical reasoning (*qiyas*) or the Islamic notion of *tashbih* (anthropomorphism).
- 8 The brief fieldwork vignettes are perhaps one of the book's greatest strengths. The author's account of her approach to the field through male relatives, and of her interactions in *madrasas* is particularly informative. One passage stands out, in the conclusion, in which Saif introduces readers to the process of *fatwa* production and to the sociality that develops around it (p. 280ff). These ethnographic insights are fascinating, and one only wishes there were more of them. Together with a more sustained analysis of the *ulema's* social lives and daily routines, this would have given readers a chance to better assess how the *ulema's* claim to religious authority is performed in situated contexts, as well as their changing mode of presence in the public sphere. Despite its shortcomings, this highly-readable work should be of interest to anyone curious about the intellectual orientation and careers of Pakistan's *ulema*.

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## NOTES

### 1.

In 2011, Punjab Governor Salman Taseer, a critic of the blasphemy laws, was assassinated by his police bodyguard, Mumtaz Qadri. The trial and the hanging of Qadri in 2016 triggered massive protests and gave rise to a Barelvi movement focused on the controversial issue of blasphemy. By 2018, an offshoot of this movement, the TLP, emerged as one of the largest religious parties in Pakistan.

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## AUTHORS

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