

"Contested Spaces, Competing Narratives: Towards Human Rights and Democracy in Pakistan" April 6 – 7, 2007, Tufts & Harvard Universities

Conference Report

Concept: The seminar aimed to bring together diverse perspectives on the struggle for democratic spaces in Pakistan in the face of increasing militarization and militancy. The focus on this struggle is even more relevant given the current political situation. The conference participants examined issues ranging from the role of the media in supporting the democratic struggle and in countering 'disappearances', air-strikes, to attacks on journalists, gender violence and increase in 'religious' extremism. We also looked at the broader implications of these trends for Pakistan, South Asia and beyond, and the role and impact of US foreign policy. There was an agreement on the need to focus on the positive trends and see how they can be strengthened.

Event format: A keynote speech and discussion set the conference agenda on the first evening (Friday), followed by brief panel presentations, roundtable discussions and question and answer sessions the following day. Both events were open to the public and engaged students as well as the expatriate community that since September 11, 2001, has been increasingly engaged in democratic politics in the US as well as 'back home' in Pakistan. The seminar proceedings were digitally recorded on audio tape to serve as resource materials for future work on the area and for policy makers.

Opening Plenary: The opening plenary session at Tufts University, attended by some 150 students, academics and members of the general public, began with refreshments in the registration area provided by Tufts. The session featured a keynote speech on "**Contested Spaces and Competing Narratives in Pakistan**" by **Ayesha Jalal**, Professor of History, Tufts University and Director of the University's Center of South Asian and Indian Ocean Studies and author of several books including *Democracy and Authoritarianism in South Asia: A Comparative and Historical Perspective* & *The State of Martial Rule: The Origins of Pakistan's Political Economy of Defence*. The session moderator was **Jacqueline Bhabha**, Adjunct Lecturer in Public Policy at Harvard University where she is also executive director of the University Committee on Human Rights Studies and a lecturer at Harvard Law School. Conference Curator **Beena Sarwar** introduced the concept and the moderator. Tufts University Provost Jamshed Bharucha also addressed the gathering briefly and expressed his support for the event.

Prof Jalal's lecture was followed by a lively question and answer session. Conference participant and radio-show host Ethan Casey audio-taped the session for a pod-cast that he is setting up (link to be made available). Catering for a buffet dinner for invited guests following the event and for lunch the following day was provided by Indian Chilli (interestingly, run by a Pakistani).

Roundtable session: On April 7, roundtable participants and guests converged at Harvard University's Center for Government and International Studies building that also houses the South Asia Initiative. Four sessions during the day featured panel presentations and a moderated discussion session between the roundtable participants, panellists and general audience. Several presenters brought publications for the display table outside the hall. Coffee, tea and snacks were also available outside the venue, catered by Sodexo at Harvard. Presentations and discussions at this day-long event were audio-taped for a pod-cast by John Doerschuk at Terry Hanley Audio Systems Inc. (link to be made available). The U-shaped formation of the seats in the hall, descending to a central pit in front of the screen where panels were held, allowed interactive discussions. The hall (capacity 70, expanded to 100 by adding extra chairs) was full with several people standing along the back through most of the event.

Some paper summaries are available at:

<http://www.sainit.fas.harvard.edu/Pakistan%20conference%20participants.htm>

The first session, “**Contesting the Ideological/Military Model**” was moderated by **Hasan Askari Rizvi**, political analyst, and newspaper columnist and former professor of political science, Punjab University, and Pakistan Studies Scholar at School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), Johns Hopkins University, 2006-07. The first presentation was by **Kamran Ali Asdar**, Associate professor of anthropology, Middle East studies and Asian studies at the University of Texas, Austin, TX, speaking on the issue of “Secular vs. Religious Nationalism”. **Humaira Rahman**, Director of the World Sindhi Institute (Canada), founder member Women's Action Forum, Pakistan and currently a post graduate student York University, Toronto, Canada talked about “Nationalist Identity vs. Unionist State”, starting her presentation with a few minutes silence to honour the ‘disappeared’ in Pakistan as their names and photographs appeared on the screen. **Christopher Candland**, Assistant Professor, Political Science, Wellesley College gave a background on “Labor Unions and the Military in Pakistan”. **Saadia Toor**, Assistant Professor, Sociology, Anthropology and Social Work, College of Staten Island, NY, talked about “Progressive Politics in the Post-Zia Years”.

Shahnaz Rouse, author of *Shifting body politics: gender, nation, state in Pakistan* (2004) and a teacher of sociology at Sarah Lawrence College, moderated the next session, “**Religion, politics and NGOs**”. **Andy McCord**, a freelance journalist and South Asia specialist based in New York talked about the “Suppression of Left/Labor Politics”. Journalist **Beena Sarwar**, a fellow at the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy, gave a presentation on “Peace Activism in Nuclear South Asia”. **Shahla Haeri**, Director of Women's Studies Program and Associate Professor in Boston University's Department of Anthropology, who has researched and written extensively on religion, law and gender dynamics in the Muslim world (including *No Shame for the Sun: Lives of Professional Pakistani Women*, 2004) talked about ‘Contradictions of Women's Empowerment in Pakistan’. **Hamid Kizilbash**, Principal Research Analyst at American Institutes for Research, Washington, D.C; founding member of SAHE, the Society for the Advancement of Education, and former Professor of Political Science at Punjab

University, was to talk “The Education Revolution” but was unable to attend at the last minute as he was held up in Pakistan.

This session was followed by lunch for invited guests and a brief documentary for all participants, *Mukhtiar Mai: The Struggle for Justice* (duration 10 min, dir. Beena Sarwar, Pakistan, 2006), focusing on the issue of gender violence and empowerment in the context of the overall socio-political and legal situation in Pakistan.

The first post-lunch session featured a joint presentation on “**The Struggle for Democracy in Pakistan: Implications for South Asia and Beyond**” by **Khaled Ahmed**, Consulting Editor, *Daily Times* and *Friday Times*, Pakistan and Pakistan Scholar -07 at Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington DC, and **Ayesha Siddiqa**, a Ph.D. in War Studies from King's College, London and author of *Pakistan's Arms Procurement and Military Buildup, 1979-99 In Search of a Policy* (2000) and *Military Inc, Inside Pakistan's Military Economy* (2007). This session was moderated by **Sugata Bose**, Gardiner Professor of Oceanic History and Affairs, head of South Asia Initiative at Harvard University (publications include *Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy*, 2004, with Ayesha Jalal). This was to have been the last session but had to be re-scheduled due to the presenters' travel arrangements.

The final session, “**Making Connections, Building Democratic Spaces**”, was moderated by **Adil Najam**, Associate Professor of International Negotiation & Diplomacy, The Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy, Tufts University. **Syed Asif Alam**, co-founder of the Association of Pakistani Professionals (<http://www.aopp.org>), an organisation that has since the events of September 11, 2001 worked to engage media in a proactive manner to help create a better understanding about Pakistan, made a presentation about “The Diaspora, Entrepreneurs and Professionals”. **Ethan Casey**, journalist, editor, radio show host (<http://www.pakcast.com>); author of *Alive And Well In Pakistan*; Seattle, WA and **Imtiaz Ali**, former reporter, BBC Pashto Service, Peshawar, currently International Knight Fellow at Stanford University talked about “The Role of the Media in Bridging the Cultural Divide”. **Sehba Sarwar**, poet, fiction writer (*Black Wings*, 2004); Founding Director of [Voices Breaking Boundaries](http://www.vbbarts.org), a non-profit multi-media arts organization in Houston (<http://www.vbbarts.org>), read a recent poem and addressed the issue of “Cutting Cultural-Political Linkages”.

Other Roundtable Participants included: **Hassan Abbas**, Research Fellow at the Belfer Center's International Security Program and Managing the Atom Project; author of *Pakistan's Drift into Extremism: Allah, the Army and America's War on Terror*; freelance columnist for various publications; **Husain Haqqani**, Director, Center for International Relations at Boston University (Department of International Relations), columnist for *The Nation* (Pakistan); author of *Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military*; **Asim Khwaja**, Associate Professor of Public Policy, KSG; areas of interest include economic development, corporate finance, education, and political economy; **Waqas Khwaja**, Associate Professor and Chair, Department of English, Agnes Scott College, poet and writer, who has compiled two anthologies of Pakistani literature, *Mornings in the Wilderness* (1988) and *Short Stories from Pakistan* (1991); **Emran Qureshi**, author

and freelance journalist, Fellow at the Harvard Labor and Worklife Program, former Fellow at the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy; **Jamil Rashid**, economist & political science professor, Kingston, Canada; **Nasim Yousaf**, independent researcher and author focusing on Pakistan-India studies (works include two chronologies on the Khaksar Movement and a recently completed manuscript on “Hidden Facts Behind British India’s Freedom: A Scholarly Look into Allama Mashraqi and Quaid-e-Azam’s Political Conflict” <http://www.allamamashraqi.com>); **Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar**, Assistant Professor of History, Brown University, author of the forthcoming “The Long Partition and the Making of Modern South Asia” Columbia University Press, 2007.

Conference feedback (in order received)

- “It was really a life-enhancing experience” - **Anwar Hakam**, *Friends of South Asia (FOSA), Boston*
- “I didn’t know very much about politics, and was there only for the last hour and a half, but I’m glad I made the effort. It was a great political education and a chance to meet like-minded people” - **Mariam Chughtai**, *graduate student at Harvard School of Education*
- “A very thought provoking and extremely interesting conference... I have never been in the presence of so many articulate and excellent-minded Pakistanis. It was a great pleasure to attend...” - **Shayan Rajani**, *Harvard undergraduate*
- “Thank you for making this happen. You along with your volunteers and sponsors deserve kudos for bringing all of us together. Indeed it was memorable gathering. My only regret is that we did not have more time to talk and discuss. But this only means that your workshop created a desire to move this dialogue forward we should try to have more such events and speak to each other more often... You made it possible for us to get to know people whom we had only read and admired from afar, meet old friends and also acquaint ourselves with new voices and perspectives” - **Kamran Ali Asdar**, *Assistant Professor of Anthropology, University of Texas, Austin*
- “It was a pleasure meeting so many progressive minds. Excellent job of pulling such a great seminar!” - **Syed Asif Alam**, *Association of Pakistani Professionals*
- “Congratulations and thanks to you and the co-workers for organizing such a nice conference where everything went according to the schedule. I benefited from the intellectual discourse during the conference and afterwards. It was an intellectually stimulating visit to Cambridge after several years.

“For the future conferences or seminars you may think of including something (more) on the culture and the media. The freedom of media is going to be an interesting issue because on the one hand many journalists and the newspapers/TV channels face the wrath of state. On the other hand the space for

expressing views has also increased. What are the limits for the media and how the government now uses pressure against them? The threats to the media from the non-state actors have also to be taken into account” - **Hasan Askari Rizvi**, *defence and political analyst*

- “My hope is that more Americans will come to understand and appreciate the rich education they can gain from exposure to the passion, finesse, wit and concern for humanity of the Pakistani people I have met these past few months” - **Daniel Richer**, *Community Access Television, New Hampshire*
- “I really did enjoy being there... I think Pakistanis are more "honest" and sharp with their criticism and analysis. I learned a lot. I particularly think that the panel with Ayesha Siddiqa and Khaled Ahmed was great” - **Shahla Haeri**, *Director, Women's Studies Program & Associate Professor of Anthropology, Boston University*
- “I thought Ayesha Jalal's opening talk was terrific, and for someone like me who is not at all knowledgeable on the subject, a masterful overview of key issues” - **Jacqueline Bhabha**, *executive director of the University Committee on Human Rights Studies at Harvard University*
- “What struck me most significantly was the attention to and commitment to thinking through local, grass-roots, popular, social as the axis of politics. Most meetings on Pakistan (here) tended to always look at national level politics with the state as its primary frame. This was always so frustrating, given my own struggles with trying to write social histories from below for this complex region called Pakistan, but I left inspired and hopeful.

“Furthermore, while this could be a historic shift, I was impressed to see so many different generations of scholars/intellectuals/students of Pakistan together in one room. The coming together was important. It was a drawing together of forces from across disciplines, from different points of departure. Thank you for organizing this, and hope this becomes an ongoing process of historicizing the Pakistani state and a serious rethinking of the future of politics within Pakistan from new locations, new alliances and new contestations” - **Vazira Fazila Yaqoobali-Zamindar**, *Assistant Professor of History, Brown University*

- “The gathering was a necessary step to bring together different voices who are working to create awareness about the political realities and multiple histories of Pakistan. Everyone who attended has at some time or another talked about creating a national/ international force that can get its voices and views heard in national/ international discourse - and we joined together in Boston last week to do so. It was an exciting first step.

“I would have wanted maybe another half-day to absorb more of the information/ individuals. There was a lot of powerful energy in the group and maybe more

time would have helped us tighten some of those links.

“Such gatherings need to happen at least once a year in different parts of the country/ world and there needs to be email communication between those passionate about the issues discussed” - **Sehba Sarwar**, *Founding Director [Voices Breaking Boundaries](#), author *Black Wings*, 2004*

- “I felt that overall the conference was excellent. I congratulate all those who were involved in putting this event together...

“Regarding the request for suggestions for the next event, I would recommend that the next conference should be on political parties in British India whose role towards the freedom of British India is not as well known; for example the Khaksar Tehrik (Khaksar Movement), Ahrars, Khudai Khidmatgar, etc. I think this topic would be quite enlightening and would trigger research on these parties, which is badly needed; without their role being known, the history of the Indian-subcontinent shall remain incomplete.

“Overall, great job, keep up the good work!” - **Nasim Yousaf**, *independent researcher*

- “Thank you for your hospitality and organizing such a wonderful conference. I thought what was brilliant was the introduction to so many people who are doing great research on Pakistan” - **Ayesha Siddiqi**, *defence analyst*

SPONSORS

The event was sponsored by: South Asia Initiative (SAI), Harvard University (thanks Sugata Bose and Rena Fonseca); **The American Institute of Pakistan Studies (AIPS)** – thanks Mark Kenoyer); **Center for South Asian and Indian Ocean Studies**, Tufts University (thanks Ayesha Jalal); **Islamic Legal Studies Program**, Harvard Law School (thanks Peri Bearman); **Carr Center for Human Rights Policy**, Kennedy School of Government (thanks Jim Fleming); **International Relations Department**, Boston University (thanks Husain Haqqani); **Women’s Studies Program, Boston University** (thanks Shahla Haeri); **Syed Mohammad Jafri Foundation**, Boston (thanks Mahmud Jaffri); **Friends of South Asia (FOSA)**, Boston (thanks Anwar Hakam and Khaled Mahmood); **University Committee on Human Rights Studies (UCHRS)**, Harvard University (thanks Jacqueline Bhabha); **Association of Pakistan Professionals (AOPP)** – thanks Asif Alam).

Thanks are also due to the staff members from the supporting institutions who went out of their way to help out and accommodate all the changes and unexpected variables that kept cropping up – **Ian Jackson** at SAI, **Alessandro Vacarro** at CGIS, **Lata Parwani** at Tufts, **Meghan Frederico** at Carr Center, **Maryam Shahsahebi** at Boston University; **Kirsten Keaton** at ILSP; **Susan Frick** at UCHRS.

Volunteer student coordinators: The event would have been impossible to organise without the dedicated help and initiative of **Tanya Ghani** and **Naveed Malik**, MPA students at the Kennedy School of Government and **Usman Khan**, a Ph.D student at the department of Electrical Engineering at Tufts University. There were several other student volunteers who helped in numerous ways, to all of whom a very sincere thanks.

Report by Conference curator

Beena Sarwar,

Fellow, Carr Center for Human Rights Policy

John F. Kennedy School of Government

Harvard University, 79 John F. Kennedy Street

Cambridge, MA 02138

Tel: (617) 496-9308

beena_sarwar@ksg.harvard.edu; beena.sarwar@gmail.com