

Living the Pious Dream in Lahore

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Ammara Maqsood, a lecturer in social anthropology at the University of Manchester, has written a short book packed with subtle observations and insights that will challenge the assumptions of many readers. The title may suggest that her theme is the holy grail of Western foreign-policy types and investors: a middle class in their own image that will bring democracy and prosperity to less developed, unstable countries. Pakistan, which for years has been afflicted by Islamic extremists wreaking havoc in its cities, seems desperately in need of such a rescue. The country has acquired a bad reputation thanks to its powerful military's murky ties with many of those same terrorist groups, which it uses as proxy forces against its neighbors, Afghanistan and India.

According to classic theories of development, the ideal cure for such ills would be the emergence of a forward-looking middle class, whose aspirations for upward mobility would eventually lead it into politics to fix the country's problems by forming civil society organizations, demanding democratic reforms, and generally exercising a moderating influence on the public sphere. However, Maqsood explains why it is simplistic to imagine a generic middle class with a secular outlook becoming dominant in a country like Pakistan.

In fact, she says, there is such a secular middle class in Pakistan, but it is a small one, largely consisting of established "old money" families, some with roots in the Muslim elite of British India and others who held positions in the state sector of the new nation in the 1950s and 1960s, which included bureaucrats as well as doctors, lawyers, teachers, and other professionals. Today, the old middle class, in Maqsood's account, is consumed with nostalgia for that early era when Pakistan was ruled by General Ayub Khan, who saw himself as a modernizing leader in the mold of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the secular Turkish state.

The New Pakistani Middle Class
by *Ammara Maqsood*
Harvard University Press, 2017

Meanwhile, a new Pakistani middle class fits the generic profile up to a point—striving, upwardly mobile, business-minded, combining a reverence for education with aspirations for a secure, prosperous lifestyle—but it blends all of that with Islamic piety. This religiosity, visible in women's headscarves and other outward symbols, adds an edge to the expected rivalry between an established bourgeoisie and newcomers ascending from lower-status groups who want to claim its privileges for themselves. And that edge is razor-sharp in

Pakistan, given the disturbing context of extremist violence that has claimed tens of thousands of lives in the country over the past two decades.

Maqsood's book is based on ethnographic fieldwork in Lahore (most of it carried out in 2009–10), long known as Pakistan's most cosmopolitan city and now a sprawling metropolis with a population of over 10 million. Many of the new middle-class families in Lahore migrated from elsewhere in Punjab province, drawn to the city from small towns and rural areas. Often they began climbing into the middle class when family members went abroad to work in the Persian Gulf or North America and sent back remittances to build wealth at home.

Maqsood herself is a native of Lahore, which seems to have given her access and insights that may not have been available to a foreign observer. Her analysis is much more subtly textured than the stereotyped comparisons between a "secular elite" and "pious masses" that are all too common in reportage from the Muslim world. She shows how the old and new middle classes define themselves not only in opposition to each other, but also in relation to international influences. They feel themselves constantly under the critical scrutiny of Western eyes, and at the same time they have strong connections to the West. The new middle class sees itself as part of a global Islamic community yet much of its lifestyle is inspired by Western examples, especially the trends set by

Pakistani expatriates and other Muslims living in Western Europe and North America, while the established bourgeoisie sends its children to British and American universities.

LONGING FOR MODERNITY

One of the many rich paradoxes that Maqsood turns up is that the nostalgia of Lahore's old middle class revolves around a lost modernity. At various cultural gatherings, she encountered the same people voicing familiar laments for the relatively progressive era under Ayub Khan, which was effaced by the Islamizing policies of a later military ruler, Zia ul-Haq, in the 1970s. Ironically, she notes, many of these aging bourgeois participated in the leftist student protests that drove Khan from power in 1969, yet they elide the contentious politics of that period into a sepia-toned golden age when Pakistan was "moving forward." They look down on the piety of the new middle class as a sign of backwardness—a betrayal of the nation's early progressive promise. Like the Western media, they tend to attribute the current religious revival to the creeping influence of Saudi-sponsored Wahhabi fundamentalism.

While the reader may assume, based on the hints she drops about her own background, that Maqsood's natural milieu would be among the embattled bourgeoisie she gently mocks, her main focus is on the rising middle class. She has sat in on women's Quran study groups, trekked through the malls where new markers of a stylish Islamic lifestyle are avidly consumed or at least window-shopped, and visited the upscale housing developments (often built and managed by the military) that offer the Pakistani dream of suburban-style privacy and comfort.

The Quran study sessions, known as *dars* gatherings, encapsulate several important trends. They are usually held in the home of a woman who has earned the authority to lead the discussions by taking a formal course at an Islamic institute for women (often one of many run by the Al-Huda movement, which is headed by a woman, Farhat Hashmi). The well-educated women who attend the *dars* are eager to learn how to properly read and interpret the holy book for themselves, and thereby to develop an authentic personal relationship with Allah. They want to become better Muslims, able to apply the Quran's ethical teachings to the situations of everyday life.

As with any aspiring middle class, education is a central preoccupation—but here the anxiet-

ies do not only concern their children's schooling (though that is indeed a frequent topic of their conversations). The best schools are still dominated by the old bourgeois families, as are the most prestigious cultural institutions and jobs, whether in the state or private sector. But by applying rational thinking to religious study in order to live exemplary Muslim lives, these aspirational believers see themselves as achieving a different and superior form of social distinction, Maqsood writes. It sets them apart from both the secular old middle class and the "backward" masses who, in their view, blindly follow traditional ritual practices and the dictates of reactionary clerics, without making an effort to use their reason to discern the true meaning of the faith.

In their religious studies and their consumption of Islamic products, such as fashionable headscarves, television shows, and children's books, and in their professional careers too, the members of the new middle class are just as preoccupied with modernity as the old middle class, Maqsood emphasizes. The difference is that their anxieties and aspirations have to do with reconciling a modern lifestyle with religious commitment: "In this context, acquiring religious knowledge and cultivating the right ethics were considered keys for moving forward, both in terms of moral growth and for attaining material success." They also believe that "Islamic values" hold "the answer to problems holding Pakistan back from 'moving forward' to become a 'modern' nation."

As Maqsood finds, the anxieties over Islam and modernity also derive from the feeling of constantly being under the gaze of the West. Pakistanis are well aware of their country's dismal reputation in the Western media, and many find this deeply unfair, blaming the problems of terrorism and political instability on US foreign policy in the region. (This is a view Maqsood occasionally seems to endorse, and there is some truth to it, though it downplays the role of the Pakistani military in cultivating extremist groups to serve as its proxies at home and abroad.) Yet the West is not just a hostile observer; it is also a source of the modern Islamic ways that the new middle class finds so attractive.

Here is another of Maqsood's interesting paradoxes: rather than exporting religious extremism to the West, these Pakistanis frequently encounter organized Islamic study centers for the first time during their sojourns abroad for education or work, and they bring these practices back with

them when they return to Pakistan. Many of the *dars* leaders are former expatriates, Maqsood notes. New Islamic clothing styles also tend to arrive on a West-to-East transmission belt. Among the pious middle class, these “Western” ways represent a desirable modernity.

QUESTIONS OF CONTEXT

Whereas Maqsood writes about the old middle class of Lahore from a somewhat sardonic perspective, she treats its upwardly mobile counterparts with respect and sympathy. She portrays them as easily the more dynamic of the two groups, far more open-minded than the disdainful caricatures of them as brainwashed Wahhabi fanatics would have it. In their pursuit of personal engagement with the text of the Quran and practical applications of the faith in everyday life, they draw eclectically on different schools of Sunni religious authority, rather than following any one of them with unquestioning obedience. Maqsood writes, “In emphasizing these ambiguities, my intention is not to suggest that such sectarian identities have no contemporary relevance.” Instead, she cautions against “taking them as fixed and unchanging categories, as is often the case, in the analysis of religious life in Pakistan.”

While Maqsood’s approach has great strengths, there are also drawbacks. Her account leaves out much of the broader context of how these old and new middle classes fit in with the rest of Pakistan. The poor are largely absent from the picture, except as the social stratum that the new middle has risen from. So are non-Sunni minority groups; it is not clear how the new middle class feels about the question of toleration, at a time when intolerance is on the rise in Pakistan and across the region, as Neeti Nair writes in this issue of *Current History*.

Nor does Maqsood offer quantitative evidence to define what she means by middle class. How many people might belong to either the old or the new middle class; what percentages of the population do they comprise; what income levels would make someone a member of these groups? Leaving such questions unaddressed, she deals exclusively with more qualitative data, having to do with what kind of lifestyle these people can afford and what they aspire to. But she does repeatedly mention the common feeling that their upwardly mobile status is precarious: “Despite the significant generational

progress that many of these families had made, they were vulnerable to setbacks caused by fluctuations in the economy and loss of jobs, or by the sudden death or illness of the main income provider.”

While Maqsood suggests that the new middle class is the most important sociological phenomenon in today’s Pakistan, other authors, such as Vali Nasr and Christophe Jaffrelot, describe the country’s social structure as still essentially feudal, characterized by extreme inequality and rigid hierarchy, with a small elite of rich landholders (which includes most of the leading politicians) exploiting the landless peasants. Given the country’s rapid urbanization and the transformation of cities like Lahore into megacities, this picture may well be changing quickly, but it is hard to know how much without some numbers to go by. At any rate, it is probably a safe bet that the Pakistani middle classes will continue to grow—and that the complex mentalities and aspirations Maqsood observes among them will need to be attended to.

Apart from the densely textured ethnography of Lahore, which is compelling in its own right, the value of her book is in the way she uses these close observations to challenge received ideas about the nature and role of the middle class in developing societies, about

the presumed incompatibility of Islam and modernity, about Pakistan, and about relations between Muslims and the West. For the most part the book is well written and light on academic jargon (though Harvard University Press’s copyediting is not quite as impeccable as one would expect). At just 151 pages, apart from the endnotes, it is concise and very much worth the time of anyone interested in how these large issues come together in a country that deserves to be better understood outside the familiar frames of terrorism and geopolitics. Much research has focused on radicalization among Muslims. Less common is such a sensitively observed study of the drama of social mobility in an Islamic setting, filled with subtle interpretations of ordinary people’s narratives of their own lives and their striving for meaning and morality along with the comfort and respectability of middle-class status.

Missing from Maqsood’s account, however, is a sustained discussion of how the trends she observes in the private sphere of the home, religious practice, and consumption preferences link up

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with the public sphere of political debate and civil society. Such connections might have helped better generalize her findings beyond Lahore to the national or international level and demonstrate their implications for Pakistan's political development and that of other mostly Muslim countries. But in a way it may be better that she has left these links implicit, or for others to bring out. As Maqsood points out, a great deal of research on the Muslim world has focused on political-religious movements. She digs in underneath this level of analysis, working at the human scale to show how individuals in this particular environment act and think independently, influenced by cultural trends but hardly reducible to mere followers of any sect or movement.

Still, for clearer guidance to the wider context, I found it helpful to read Maqsood's book in a pairing with Vali Nasr's 2009 book *Forces of Fortune: The Rise of the New Muslim Middle Class and What It Will Mean for Our World*. As the unwieldy subtitle indicates, Nasr's book is squarely pitched at a general readership keen for news it can use. He duly delivers a panoramic survey with easily digestible historical background and reportage-style vignettes from his travels across the Muslim world.

As befits an author who would soon serve a stint in the State Department during the Obama administration (advising the legendary diplomat Richard Holbrooke in his final mission as special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan) and is now

dean of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Nasr frames his discussion in terms of what Washington must understand about this new middle class in order to promote democracy in countries like Pakistan and counter the forces of extremism. It is a rather instrumental approach, and some aspects of the argument already have not stood the test of time—for example, Nasr's admiration of the "Turkish model" under Islamist leadership that has since proved to be anything but genuinely democratic. Likewise, his confidence that free markets lead inevitably, if gradually, to liberal democracy seems open to question these days.

Even so, his observations about the entrepreneurial yet pious Muslim middle class are often striking and anticipate many of the points made by Maqsood. It is a pity that she does not engage at all with Nasr's book—it does not appear in her bibliography, though she does list a couple of his earlier works on the Jamaat-e-Islami, Pakistan's largest Islamic fundamentalist movement—since he provides the kind of broad political and economic context largely absent from her book. But the sweep and brisk pace of his narrative preclude the richness of a close study of a single locale, an approach that allows Maqsood to offer finer-grained observations that add a more intimate dimension to Nasr's global framework. Taken together, their work offers unexpected insights into an emerging middle class and its efforts to reconcile modernity and faith. ■