

B | Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World at BROOKINGS

RETHINKING POLITICAL ISLAM SERIES

December 2015

REACTION ESSAY

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[CLICK HERE FOR MATTHEW'S ORIGINAL WORKING PAPER ON PAKISTAN](#)

[Focusing on Pakistan](#), my paper tracks two broad sets of Islamist actors—the Jama'at-e-Islami (JI) and the Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam (JUI). The Jama'at-e-Islami is analogous to the Muslim Brotherhood, but the JI's student wing has generally been more influential within the party than Brotherhood student wings in the Middle Eastern countries covered by this project and, over time, the JI has moved beyond merely contesting elections to cozying up with military dictators as well. The JUI is led by clerics rooted in Sunni Deobandi madrasas and, like the JI, it has also contested elections and enjoyed the patronage of military dictators. Since the early 1970s, both groups have joined ruling coalitions, and the JUI has also led coalitions governing at a provincial level.

My paper provides a sense of the religious and political networks surrounding each of these two parties, including (a) a network of independent schools functioning largely as private businesses (with each network competing with state schools and other private schools for students); (b) various *dawa* (religious education) organizations affiliated with ideologues from each group as well as mass-based movements like the (Sunni Deobandi) Tablighi Jama'at; and (c) militant proxy groups operating in places like East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), Kashmir, and Afghanistan.

Neither group is a "Salafi" group. In Pakistan, the "Salafi" terrain is associated with a Sunni subgroup known as the Ahl-e-Hadith with its own range of schools, *dawa* organizations (e.g. Jamaat-ud-Dawa), and militants patronized by the Pakistan Army (e.g. Lashkar-e-Taiba). In Pakistan, Salafism is not a target of the security establishment; in some ways it is part of that establishment.

Considering the other papers in this project, I would like to offer five brief thoughts. These broadly comparative thoughts may help to stitch the papers together and place the case of Pakistan in context.

1. Islamist parties and state power

Broadly, there are two groups of countries involved in this project—those like [Egypt](#) or [Malaysia](#) where Islamists have won power outright (either at a national or a provincial level) and those where this has been less likely and collaboration with the existing regime or “mere survival” is the name of the game. In each of these scenarios, pragmatic politics play an important role, both in the realm of electoral success and in the realm of “mere survival.” Pragmatic politics and a general absence of ideological “red lines” (allowing Islamists to move away from what might be considered religiously “right” in order to do what is politically “smart” for their party) figure prominently in the political experience of Pakistani Islamists as well. However, Pakistan fits in between the two camps described above.

At the provincial level, Islamists in Pakistan have not merely joined coalition governments in Pakistan, but led them—thus providing Pakistani Islamists with an opportunity to enact religious policies under a broad *hisba* (enforcement-of-piety) banner as well as social justice policies of a more explicitly economic nature (while, at the same time, suffering at the polls for their failure to satisfy complex constituent demands, just like any other party). In this sense, Pakistan’s Islamists illuminate something about the practice of Islamist governance.

At the national level, however, the electoral success of Pakistani Islamists has been quite limited, meaning that collaboration with other parties has always been the name of the game. Thus, both the JI and the JUI have reflected something closer to the Islamist mantra found in many other countries: “do not govern alone.”

Unlike any of the other cases in this project, however, collaboration between Islamist political parties and the state in Pakistan has reached beyond electoral and monarchical politics to include direct collaboration with the Army. This pattern was less prominent under Pakistan’s first dictator, General Ayub Khan, than it was under later dictators like Generals Zia-ul-Haq and Pervez Musharraf.

2. Islamist parties and violence

In general, this project includes some countries where Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi factions have been deeply involved in anti-state violence ([Syria](#), [Libya](#)) as well as countries where both groups have shied away from, or strongly disavowed, violence.

In Pakistan, however, the story is a more complicated. Although both the JI and the JUI have generally eschewed violence themselves, we see proxy militants tied to the student cadres of both groups collaborating with the state in transnational violence and, in a looser fashion, battling the state as well. Clearly, the value of [the inclusion-moderation hypothesis](#) is limited when “inclusion” involves proxy militants patronized by the military.

In Pakistan, religious violence is not traced to concerns about an absence of proper religious education (as in [Tunisia](#)). Instead it is traced to the role of religious education provided within and outside of the state. There is, however, no clear “Islamist” position on the use of violence.

Both the JI and the JUI have used violence to collaborate with the state and, via loosely affiliated proxies, to rebel against it. In fact this dual position has made it difficult for the state to describe insurgent elements within each group as an exclusively “foreign” element that must be excised and destroyed.

3. Islamist politics and state strength

Across the different countries examined in this project, the context within which Islamist strategies are formulated is shaped by specific, robust, and enduring forms of constitutional architecture (electoral, monarchical, or both) as well as specific patterns of state breakdown.

In Pakistan, both constitutional architecture and elements of state breakdown exist simultaneously. By and large, Pakistan’s relatively stable constitutional architecture (including its fairly permissive approach to civil society-based activism) has defined the parameters within which local “debates about religion” take place. But, in some parts of the country, the reach of the state is either limited by design (e.g. the Federally Administered Tribal Areas [FATA]) or deeply inconsistent (e.g. Karachi). In these areas, patterns of state breakdown explain trajectories of strategic decision-making more than the legal architecture of the state.

The Arab cases in this project reflect a relatively “statist” approach to religious politics. In Pakistan, this statism is relaxed—both via civil-society activism and via patterns of state collapse.

4. Islamist politics and transnational spillover

Broadly, one might expect patterns of transnational spillover to figure prominently within transnationally networked Islamist formations like the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jama’at-e-Islami as well as transnationally networked jihadi formations like al-Qaida. However, the papers in this project clearly show that existing hypotheses regarding the transnational “demonstration effects” of the Arab Spring (or the rise of the Islamic State) have been overstated. Indeed, one is struck by the rather limited extent to which Islamist parties around the world actually engage in cross-national comparative thinking regarding their “fellow travelers.”

It seems that this project will offer new conclusions about the relative power of “transnational” and “domestic” drivers within the greater scheme of Islamist politics.

Turning specifically to the transnational reach of the Islamic State, I found myself wondering whether “Salafism” might be a less important as an ideological driver than country-specific patterns of anti-Shia sectarianism. In Pakistan, it is not “Salafism” that links those claiming attachments to the transnational aspirations of the Islamic State. On the contrary, “sectarian” politics figure in several of the countries featured in this project, from [Syria](#) and [Malaysia to Indonesia, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Pakistan](#).

5. Islamist politics and youth

Finally, I was struck by the extent to which internal generational cleavages matter within various

Islamist movements, not only in Pakistan, with reference to the JI's student wing (and the Taliban), but also in [Tunisia](#), [Syria](#), [Egypt](#), and many other countries.

In the past I have written about the religious politics of young people in Pakistan, stressing the ways in which domestic stalemates generate a push for expanding transnational ties. In this project, however, I came away with a greater appreciation for the domestic side of this equation and the role that generational divides play in activating or intensifying domestic cleavages.

About this Series:

The [Rethinking Political Islam series](#) is an innovative effort to understand how the developments following the Arab uprisings have shaped—and in some cases altered—the strategies, agendas, and self-conceptions of Islamist movements throughout the Muslim world. The project engages scholars of political Islam through in-depth research and dialogue to provide a systematic, cross-country comparison of the trajectory of political Islam in 12 key countries: Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Syria, Jordan, Libya, Pakistan, as well as Malaysia and Indonesia.

This is accomplished through three stages:

- A **working paper** for each country, produced by an author who has conducted on-the-ground research and engaged with the relevant Islamist actors.
- A **reaction essay** in which authors reflect on and respond to the other country cases.
- A **final draft** incorporating the insights gleaned from the months of dialogue and discussion.