

# COVER STORY: All is well... or is it?

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**LET me tell you the new consensus: Pakistan is a weak state and a strong society. The state — civil state — is weak insofar as it cannot adequately respond to crisis in its population (the floods of 2010, for example) or it is weak insofar as it cannot effectively govern (collect taxes, for example). The society is pluralistic, and open. It has a growing middle class, solid infrastructure, robust economic “fundamentals”. It faces crisis — terrorism, wars, inflation, scarcity of water and electricity, floods — but the combination of strong society and an organised military has kept Pakistan afoot.**

This is the new consensus. You will find it in a number of recent books, but most prominently in Maleeha Lodhi’s edited volume, *Pakistan: Beyond the ‘Crisis State’*. The volume, she writes in the introduction, is meant as a set of policy responses which can guide a “capable leadership” in charting “a new course”. For this prescriptive dosage, Lodhi assembles experts in the fields of eco-

...onomics, human development, security, journalism and a solitary historian. Pakistan, the 17 chapters assert, is not a failed, or a failing state, and there are reasons for hope and optimism as well as concrete signs and steps which can even ensure progress.

Ayesha Jalal's opening essay posits a Pakistan which gave up "credible history" for politics and ideological expediency and, as a result, is left with no historical consciousness and scant hope of defining any semblance of a national identity. Get more open-minded history, she counsels. An advice that I cannot help but endorse whole-heartedly.

These are followed by essays on economics (by Meekal Ahmed, Mudassar Mazhar Malik); on the army and politics (by Shuja Nawaz, Saeed Shafqat, Feroz Hasan Khan, Ahmed Rashid, Syed Rifaat Hussain) and on civil institutions (Ishrat Hussain, Ziad Alahdad, Shanza Khan and Mooed Yusuf). There is an almost obligatory essay by Akbar S. Ahmed, untiringly relating the relevance of M. A. Jinnah to the current state, and a discordantly cheerful note by novelist Mohsin Hamid. The overall themes of all the essays remains in sync with the central agenda — Pakistan is not about to fail. Lodhi in her essay, "Beyond the Crisis State", argues that Pakistan's political parties should tap into the growing middle class and their need for good governance and set a new agenda of reforms for the

and cast a new agenda of reforms for the future.

There is much to laud here — the effort to be positive, the effort to offer workable solutions, platforms, venues. Yet, the volume often fails to heed the basic call in that very first essay by Ayesha Jalal — a critical self-reflection, a grounding in historical complexity. Take the Hamid essay, “Why Pakistan Will Survive”. Hamid notes Pakistan’s vastness in size and population, its “diversity,” its spirit of “co-existence” and its “tolerance”. “What does make someone Pakistani then?” Hamid asks. “If you are from Pakistan, then you’re a Pakistani”. This tautological and ideological definition, argues Hamid, allows for great flexibility, and “relief”. It is also a shockingly blind statement. The Ahmadis who are “from Pakistan” are not considered by the state and the Constitution to be “Pakistani” with equal rights. A brutalised and marginalised Baloch minority is considered to be “Pakistani” by the state but they would rather not be “from Pakistan”. And those are merely the travails of the present day. The issue of who is “from Pakistan” and, hence, get a chance to “govern Pakistan”, has already fractured the state into two in 1971.

Hamid’s inability to critically address historical inequalities in Pakistan could possibly be excused as befitting such an essay with rose-coloured glasses. However, it should not.

Pakistan’s strengths and weaknesses.

the crisis it faces and will face, and the paths one can recommend or solicit are all valid and needed venues for open dialogue and critical commentary. However, the first step must be of awareness of the realities that exist — not to bloom them into horrifying garlands of doom but to be clear-eyed, and honest to the everyday victims of the everyday atrocities committed by the state and the citizens of Pakistan against their own. This is not a matter of policy or practicality; it is a matter of the ethics which govern out public debates.

There are, of course, discordant notes in the volume: “Pakistan is at the crossroads of its political destiny” (p. 45); “Pakistan is a prisoner of its geography and history” (p. 79); “Pakistan today faces a growing threat from violent extremists and Islamic militants” (p. 131); “Pakistan’s energy sector is in crisis” (p. 231). Perhaps, the finest essay in the volume is journalist Zahid Hussain’s dissection of JUI’s militancy in “Battling Militancy”. A cautionary note, it highlights the collusion between the military, Islamic militants, the so-called moderates and the various sources which trace back to Kingdom of Saudi Arabia’s particularly sectarian interests in the region.

In the end, as befitting a project geared to be presented in handy power-point in conference rooms across Washington DC or London, there are the “Concluding Notes” — a distillation of the various ex-

notes — a distillation of the various expertise at display in the volume into bite-sized chunks. There is the call to prioritise Pakistan along the nexus of security and stability; a note to military leadership to heed the civilians; a call for better relationships with India and stability in Afghanistan. All sensible, and desirable, options, of course.

Yet, here again, there is a jarring presence of reality least understood: “Pakistan should also seek to revive historic and mutually supportive relationships with key Islamic nations especially Saudi Arabia...” This is mind-boggling. For one, there is no need to revive what has never flagged. More importantly, the one traceable source of both sectarian invective and willing militants in the region — the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia — needs to be resisted in the national interest and publicly exposed. The DC/Riyadh connection and the Islamabad/DC connection are just as important to understanding the current policy and security paradigms of the country as the other profiles sketched in the volume.

Pakistan, as a subject of critical analysis, is ill-served when realities are ignored for the sake of policy. The need to resist a crude stereotype of “failed state” is clear and present but to go “beyond the crisis state”, we must also look seriously to history, to narratives other than the state or military and admit the harsh truths: The Pakistani military is just as fallible as its civilian regime, though the latter needs

civilian regime, though the latter needs the explicit support of the population as a legitimate government. The state structure incorporates within it gross injustices towards the minorities — defined religiously, ethnically or culturally. Redressing these injustices — against the Ahmadis, the Christians, the Hindus, the Baloch, the Swatis — is just as vital to the nation-state as the need to prioritise health or education or commercial sectors. This volume is but a hampered beginning in this long process of a national soul-searching.

*The reviewer is the author of [Where the Wild Frontiers Are: Pakistan and the American Imagination](#)*

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**(Current Affairs)** Edited by Maleeha Lodhi  
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