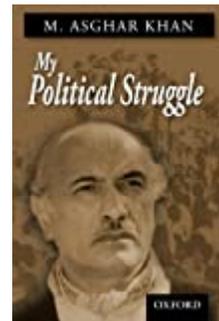




Mohammad Asghar Khan. *My Political Struggle*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. 595 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-547620-0.



Reviewed by Umair A. Muhajir (<http://qalandari.blogspot.com>)

Published on H-Asia (January, 2010)

Commissioned by Sumit Guha (The University of Texas at Austin)

Democracy and Indifference

One of the grave problems confronting English-language political discourse in Pakistan is the almost universal indifference of the country's intelligentsia and English-speaking elites to the question of ideology in normal politics. That is, leaving aside the meta-narratives of the pre-independence Pakistan movement (for a separate homeland for India's Muslims), and the current national debate on Islamic extremism and the future direction of Pakistan, in both of which ideological issues have been front-and-center (not coincidentally, both are seen as calling into question the very idea of Pakistan in one sense or another), the country's political discourse is largely conducted as if ideology had no role to play in everyday politics; indeed, as if it did not even exist for the most part.

The objection is more than merely academic. An indifference to ideology means that political discourse in Pakistan remains mired in technocratic questions of efficiency, development, and corruption—rather than those of (e.g.) social justice, fairness, and the relationship of the state to its citizens—thereby privileging and

perpetuating the essentially bureaucratic model of the nation-state inherited from the British Raj. This problem is hardly unique to Pakistan, but the country's particular historical experience means that the stakes might be higher for it. Simply put, a preoccupation with efficiency and honesty can all too easily become a preference for the orderliness and authoritativeness of military rule, as opposed to the unglamorous horse-trading, venality, and sheer messiness of normal politics. This attitude was clearly visible in the response to Pakistan's most recent military coup, when far too many in the country's urban intelligentsia signed on to Pervez Musharraf's 1999 deposition of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's spectacularly corrupt civilian government. Nor can anyone say with confidence that Musharraf's 2008 exit has settled once and for all the question of military involvement in Pakistan's politics. As long as the intellectual horizon remains an essentially bureaucratic one, the likelihood of support for a military intervention by the very social groups who have benefited from the status quo cannot be ruled out.

The above goes a long way toward accounting for what is wrong with Air-Marshal (retd.) Mohammad Asghar Khan's *My Political Struggle*—and toward explaining why what is right about Khan does not begin to address the problem. And there is much that is right about Khan (b. 1921), the one-time head of Pakistan's air force for eight years, beginning in 1957. Subsequent to his 1965 retirement, Khan was appointed to lead Pakistan's airline by the country's first military dictator, Ayub Khan, and resigned in 1968 to plunge into active politics, first against continued military rule, and then, more famously, against the civilian government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP), that assumed power after the secession of East Pakistan as Bangladesh in 1971. Although Khan's own political party, the Tehrik-i-Istiqal, has never enjoyed electoral success, including after the restoration of Pakistani democracy in 1988, Khan is remembered fondly by many as an honest politician, a decent man at odds with the endemic venality surrounding him. Indeed, his decency is even held up as explaining his lack of success. Not least by Khan himself, who responds to charges of political failure by noting that "[t]o succeed in being elected by dubious means or to bend the law ... is considered the hallmark of a successful politician. Those who do not do so are considered ... failures in politics." [1] Khan's personal goodness is of course beside the point. But quotes like the one above, while admittedly poignant, illustrate that Khan is squarely within the bureaucratist tradition of Pakistani political discourse this review started out by critiquing, a tradition within which there can be no greater virtue than financial probity and orderly, efficient governance. If this sounds unfair to Khan, his books (*My Political Struggle* is a follow-up to 2005's *We've Learnt Nothing From History*) don't help much. The combined length of these two books runs to over eight hundred pages, yet one searches in vain for any indication, much less explanation, of Khan's ideology, or that of his party.

The format of *My Political Struggle* compounds the problem. According to Khan, the book's chronicle of "the picture as I saw it over three decades—i.e., 1972–2001—is based on Tehrik-i-Istiqal's record of events (19 December 1971–12 January 1975), and a diary that I kept of events thereafter" (p. ix). Rather than reproduce the diary in full, Khan thought it would be more appropriate to give a general overview of events as I saw them and reproduce only those entries that are likely to interest the reader. But Khan provides no insight into what Tehrik-i-Istiqal's record of events consists of, who wrote it, what it is based on precisely means, and what sort of polit-

ical material has been left out of the personal diaries reproduced here. Turning to the record and diaries as published, one finds oneself drowning in minutiae: no fewer than 491 of the book's over 550 pages consist of these entries, most of them simply accounts of trips undertaken by Khan in the course of his work, records that meetings with various political figures took place (the content of these meetings is usually indicated only in the most general terms), or recitations of the iniquities of this or that government against Khan or the Tehrik-e-Istiqal. The reader gets hardly any flavor of Khan's political struggle to mobilize support for the Tehrik-i-Istiqal, and the result is a book that falls between two stools, lacking the insight and sweep of a book on politics, as well as the illusion of intimacy afforded by an autobiography.

Moreover, despite the plethora of diary entries, important events are inexplicably glossed over. For instance, a June 1977 diary entry suggests Khan might have been administered poison at Bhutto's behest (p. 102)—but the subject never crops up again. And one searches in vain for any explanation as to why the Tehrik-i-Istiqal allied with the PPP after 1990 (after Benazir Bhutto's PPP-government was dismissed by the country's president, effectively on the say-so of the military, as prelude to a Nawaz Sharif victory in elections widely seen as rigged). Khan contents himself with an August 1990 diary entry that elevates blandness to an art form: "Discussed the forthcoming elections [with Benazir Bhutto] and agreed on an alliance for the elections and thereafter" (p. 402)—this barely two pages (and eighteen days) after a diary entry noting that Khan had agreed to enter into an alliance with one of the two major political forces, the PPP and the IJI [headed by Nawaz Sharif] or other opposition parties" (pp. 400–401).

In the absence of any serious ideological engagement with the politics of Pakistan (as opposed to with mere events), *My Political Struggle* leaves the reader with such generalities as Khan's opposition to military rule, and his proposal for how power might be decentralized from the central government to the individual provinces. These are eminently sensible ideas, but in the absence of a coherent program, they skirt banality, and are reducible to little more than exhortations to good governance. Ultimately, and likely unwittingly, Khan appears to share the worldview of a cultural and bureaucratic elite that has historically set far greater store by the appearance of decisive action, than by the appearance of democracy; by the slogans of honesty and wiping the slate clean, than by those of social justice and redistribution. In other words, like so many others, Khan's call is for a renewal of the

dispensation symbolized by Pakistan's founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, a vision of the country as an ordered rule-of-law state where politicians would strive to serve the people with honesty and selfless dedication: "[i]f the values that the founder of Pakistan had given us were to be summed up in one word, it would be 'honesty'" (p. 519). An ideology, in short, that presents itself as neutral political virtue, and the practitioners of which do not even feel that they need to make any case for its relevance to Pakistan's socioeconomic realities, much less recognize the status quo elements the ideology encodes.

Furthermore, Khan (and not only Khan; to the extent we are speaking of a failure here, it is that of an entire class) is unable to see that this worldview leads to practical difficulties, by raising the stakes to unfortunate effect. A worldview that sees political disagreement as borne of the contest between good and bad people, not contending ideologies, is one that elevates ordinary politics to the level of metaphysical conflict, rendering compromise all but impossible. Thus, although Khan gets credit for being one of the few prominent West Pakistani voices in 1970 to argue that the political crisis enveloping the country had a simple solution—the Awami League, representing the interests of the more populous East Pakistan, and having secured an absolute majority in the Pakistan legislature despite failing to win any seats in West Pakistan, should have been asked to form the government—his explanation for why this was not done centers on the imbecility and iniquity of Pakistan's military ruler, Yahya Khan, and even more so, on Bhutto's ambition. On Khan's view, Bhutto—whose neo-socialist PPP had won an overwhelming majority of seats in West Pakistan in the 1970 elections, but had fewer than half the seats nationwide—wanted a political "solution" that would ensure his primacy, even at the cost of Pakistan's unity. Bhutto's motivations need not be underplayed, but it is surely reductive to ascribe the break-up of Pakistan, the product of a quarter-century of East Pakistan's underdevelopment and exploitation, culminating in Bengali support for the Awami League's vision of recasting Pakistan as a confederation of its two wings rather than a centralized nation-state; not to mention the genocidal massacres conducted by the Pakistani military in East Pakistan as a "solution" to the political deadlock; to the machinations of any one man.

That man remains Khan's blind spot. Perhaps with good reason: there is no denying that Bhutto's socialist rhetoric was leavened by no small measure of demagoguery and intolerance, and in the years after Bangladesh's secession, when the PPP dominated Pak-

istan's political life, Bhutto and the PPP did their best to make life difficult for Khan and his party, by means of, as Khan tells the story, trumped-up legal charges, intimidation, outright thuggery, and, ultimately election fraud. That last proved to be a fatal mistake: the rigging of Pakistan's 1977 elections in favor of the PPP—elections that many (though not Khan) believe the PPP might have won anyway—was the spur for a massive oppositional mobilization, in which Khan's Tehrik-e-Istiqlal, along with other political parties, played a major role. Ultimately, the fragile system gave way in July 1977, when General Zia-ul-Haq deposed Bhutto and imposed martial law, promising to hold fresh elections within ninety days. Two years later, Bhutto was convicted of murder and hanged; the promised elections would not be held until after the general's own assassination in 1988.

Khan's own role in the deposition of Bhutto's government is itself the subject of some controversy, principally due to an anti-government letter he wrote to the "Chiefs of Staff and the officers of the defence services of Pakistan" in April 1977. The letter is nothing if not inflammatory, claiming that "the military action in East Pakistan was a conspiracy in which [Bhutto] played a Machiavellian role," and that Bhutto was "guilty of a grave crime against the people: 'It is not your duty to support his illegal regime.... As men of honor it is your responsibility to do your duty, and the call of duty in these trying circumstances is not the blind obedience of unlawful commands. There comes a time in the lives of nations when each man has to ask himself whether he is doing the right thing. Answer this call honestly and save Pakistan'" (pp. 501-502).

Khan's bland defense of this letter, to the effect that he was simply "remind[ing] the armed forces" that they were only supposed to follow "lawful" orders, and had not issued "an invitation to them to take over the country," strikes one as disingenuous.^[2] The tone of the letter, its casting of Pakistan's elected head of government as practically a traitor, and the appeal to the military to "[a]nswer" the call "and save Pakistan," was highly improper and loaded with incitement—not to mention cynical, given that it implicitly absolved the military of any responsibility for the atrocities it had committed. While no one can deny Khan's years of harassment and illegal detentions by both the Bhutto and Zia regimes for no good reason, the April 1977 letter, and, more broadly, his equivocations when the democratic regime being overthrown happened to be Bhutto's, remain a black spot on Khan's record. Bhutto's wickedness was self-evident, Khan seems to suggest, and he brought the catastrophe

on himself. The diary entry for the day following Zia's coup against Bhutto is telling: "Was told that army had taken over and Bhutto had been removed. An inevitable end to an inglorious five-and-a-half years of a power-hungry, mad man in office" (p. 108).

Khan isn't alone in his loathing of Bhutto, especially among the Pakistani bourgeoisie, and one might speculate as to the reasons why Bhutto has attracted especial opprobrium. Whatever his other failings, Bhutto was the most explicitly ideological of (West) Pakistani political leaders since 1947, the only one to buttress the nation-state's foundational ideology of Muslim otherness with the emancipatory rhetoric of socialist redistribution for the masses. The sincerity of Bhutto's populist convictions has long been mocked (the man remained a large landowner from Pakistan's Sindh province to the end of his days), but the need (and opportunity) he sensed was real. Bhutto's deployment of redistributive and emanci-

patory political tropes powered an unprecedented political mobilization among poor Pakistanis in the provinces of Punjab and Sindh, unmatched by anything before or since in (West) Pakistan's history. To the extent Khan (or other Pakistani liberals) wonder about Bhutto's greater ability to mobilize the people of Pakistan, the difference might perhaps be explained not just in terms of Bhutto's decency-deficit; but because the promise of "Bhuttoism" proved more meaningful in the context of Pakistan's day-to-day realities than the desiccated parliamentary liberalism on offer from the other side. Therein, perhaps, lies food for thought of greater relevance to Pakistan's struggle for democracy.

Note

[1]. M. Asghar Khan, *We've Learnt Nothing From History* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2005), 226.

[2]. *Ibid.*, 132.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-asia>

Citation: Umair A. Muhajir. Review of Khan, Mohammad Asghar, *My Political Struggle*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. January, 2010.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25696>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.