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The Disorder of Things: Rethinking Social Critique in Postcolonial Pakistan

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*Abhi Tak Admi Sayd-E-Zaboon-E-Sheber Yari Hai
Qayamat Hai Ke Insan Nu-E-Insan Ka Shikari Hai*

Even now, mankind is the miserable prey to imperialism;
How apocalyptic is it that man is hunted by man!

~ Allama Iqbal, *Tulu-e-Islam* (The Rise of Islam)

On 8 March 2022, Shebaz Sharif, leader of the Pakistani opposition party, the Pakistan Muslim League (N), tabled a no-confidence motion asking for the removal of Imran Khan as the Prime Minister of Pakistan for being unable to handle the country's economic crises. This motion was allowed to be tabled by a majority vote that included members of Imran Khan's own party. As time got closer to the no-confidence vote, Khan attempted to resist the growing opposition on all political fronts. This included rallies where Khan claimed fear of assassination and foreign intervention, and served legal notice to members of his own political party for 'defection' under Article 63A of the Constitution of Pakistan. On 3 April, by which time Khan had lost all his political allies, President Arif Alvi announced the dissolution of the National Assembly on Khan's behest. On the same day, the opposition party challenged the dissolution in

the Supreme Court, which ruled all orders for dissolution are subject to the Supreme Court's consent. The court order enabled the opposition party and its coalition to conduct their own session of the National Assembly on the same day and vote Khan out and vote in the opposition leader, Sharif, as the interim Prime Minister on 3 April 2022. Amid an economic crash on 10 June 2022, the interim government released the financial budget for 2022-2023 while reaching agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for an extension of the bailout agreement, made previously with Khan's Government, from USD 6 billion to 8 billion. Soon after, in another political surprise, the by-elections showed a clear win for Khan's party in the province of Punjab, historically dominated by the Sharif family, raising calls for a general election. On 20 August 2022, a warrant for the arrest of Imran Khan was filed under the Anti-Terrorism Act 1997 for ['threatening the Police and Judiciary' at a public rally](#).

Khan's removal and the events that followed have been met with varied responses. There is a [careful critique](#) cautioning against the celebration of a return to the 'old order' with the blessing of the military. There has also been a celebration of the removal of a demagogue populist conservative leader through constitutional means. Yet another reaction stems from the odd paradox of the 'anti-imperialist' and 'messianic' nature of Imran Khan's support: the appeal of a non-secular, non-western/non-European notion of Pakistani Muslim identity. It is not a surprise then that the comparison of Imran Khan's rise with other populist leaders, specifically Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has been accompanied similarly with a rise in the utilization of 'decolonisation' or 'anti-colonial' rhetoric as part of academic and popular politics. The conversation on social and political life in Pakistan is thus rife with contradictions in terms of the orders that govern society. We can disentangle these contradictions through historical sensitivity to colonial continuities while being aware of local sociological realities of the country that intersect with the world made through and by imperialism. By placing this discussion of 'orders' in the frames of Fanon, Césaire and Wynter's notion of ['colonial domination as the ordering episteme of the "modern secular rational" thought'](#), this Reflection reconfigures how different orders in postcolonial Pakistan are connected through histories of colonial domination.

The Military Order: The Puppeteers We Know

In Pakistani state politics the role of the military is an unquestionable reality. Barring nationalistic ideologues, the Pakistani military's intervention, power and control over civil and commercial realms is an unspoken fact and has been proven by several grounded [analyses](#) as problematic for Pakistani society. While there is some truth to the exceptionalisation of military control over state politics in Pakistan, the conclusions drawn may benefit from a more conceptual look into the nature of a

'military' institution from an imperial perspective. Beyond Pakistan, in postcolonial countries the trope and reality of military dictatorships and rule is used as part of the rhetoric – to use [Mutua's terms](#) – of constructing the 'savage' global South and the 'saviour' global North. At the same time, analysing the institution of the military from an imperial perspective is also to recognise the military as a product of a capitalist nation-state that is meant to protect the accumulation of capital [by force or by rule](#). This outlook understands the military-industrial complex as not necessarily a geographically contingent reality, but one motivated by the creation, maintenance and continuation of a capitalist nation-state.

Reframing or rather broadening our conceptual tools to analyse sociological realities of how the military operates in the country as a critical arm of a capitalist nation-state moves us to rethink our politics of resistance against 'the state'. In Pakistan, for example, understanding how the military utilizes caste distinctions to further its political ends tell us far more about the political consciousness of the peripheries of the country than simply understanding it as an omnipotent institution hijacking 'democracy'. This rethinking also makes a valuable contribution to linking colonial continuities to postcolonial politics in Pakistan regarding the nature of military rule in the subcontinent by the British East India Company and its legacies. Hence, while the role of the Pakistani military in the state is in some ways exceptional, my provocation is to ask if it is productive to locate every legal and political disorder upon this one institution. Are we relying on discourses that blindly essentialise colonial, developmentalist, capitalist and European models of 'democratic' state-making? Is the emphasis on military control as the core social critique in any way helpful in identifying what systems cause violence to vast populations whose concerns may be more immediate than middle class anxieties about 'democracy'? My suggestion is not that social critique should stop focusing on the military's involvement in the governance of Pakistan. Rather my point is that reflection on the military alone is not useful if other sociological intersections on which the society is ordered are not also taken into account. I argue that there are a set of powerful interlocking systems of colonial domination, an appreciation of which opens up critical avenues to diagnose the state of politics in Pakistan.

The Old Order: Caste or Class?

Unlike the military order, the Old Order, namely 'dynastic' political families and politics, are far less researched but are nonetheless almost as much an accepted reality. Dynastic politics refers, in the context of Pakistan, to what are recognised socially as upper caste feudal families. In both the context of the making of Pakistan and in the post-independence era, the main actors in the two major political parties (the Muslim

League (N) and the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP)) in the Pakistani political arena have been [politicians from upper caste families](#). The major political party fighting for Muslim Majority rule in the subcontinent, the Muslim League, included within it the major political party of the Muslim elite and upper caste members, most of whom claimed lineage from royalty, '[Syedness](#)' (that is to say, part of the Ashraf caste),¹ or socially connected upper castes. This included notably [Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan](#). Historically, in the realm of both [politics](#) and [business](#), caste has continued to be recognized as the central backbone of the making of Pakistan. Though often framed in form of class politics, dynastic or petty corruption, or the 'Old Order', it is a reference to what *can* be fixed by popular politics. It was and still remains a reason for broad support for the former Prime Minister Imran Khan, who seemingly ran on the discourse of rooting out corruption and was understood as an 'outsider' to this Old Order. The current interim Prime Minister Shebaz Sharif's family, including his brother Nawaz Sharif who was former Prime Minister, was taken to court in what was called the [Panama Papers Case](#). Imran Khan referred the case to the Supreme Court accusing the Sharif family of tax evasion, corruption and money laundering. The case itself was dismissed at the Supreme Court on the basis of inadmissibility of evidence. In this context, Imran Khan as leader of a relatively new party, the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI), was not immediately recognised as part of the Old Order even if his party became populated with a similar cadre of political caste elites.

Corruption is used as a catch-all term for the problems of global South countries. Like blaming the military, this again is steeped in reality while also being a popular trope reminiscent of colonial rule over the subcontinent. East India Company officer and Governor-General of Bengal Warren Hastings, for example, in his [trial of impeachment](#) by the British Government, described his approach to the Company's rule in the subcontinent to be based on its local reality as a land of arbitrary power and despotism. The conflict between the British imperial state and Hastings had its own underlying politics of justifying greater control and thus revenue. The discourse used by Hastings argued a 'different geographic morality' to be applied to the subcontinent, as a land where 'despotism' is the way to govern. The discourse of the 'corrupt' third world is echoed in contemporary discussions on underdevelopment, not necessarily on the basis of a 'different geographic morality' but one where universalising European logic can civilise such places. We also see this in the context of the international conversation on global poverty where the 'scrouge of corruption' is used to

¹ Syedness and the Ashraf caste are hierarchical social constructions primarily in South Asian Islamic practice, though they also exist outside of South Asia. They are based on nobility (and thus higher social status) through blood lineage, which either links to the Prophet or claims to be anointed through Prophetic 'blessing'. A special issue in the Royal Asiatic Society Studies Journal on 'Historicizing Syedness' is hyperlinked in-text.

[misleadingly diagnose countries](#) of the global South as underdeveloped, placing the Old Order of dynastic or despotic rulers as inherently specific to *this* part of the world, that is to say the global South.

Beyond simply a western construction, and in the spirit of cautious self-awareness, it remains important to understand what exactly this Old Order is, and its place as a part and reflection of social order in Pakistan and its past within the history of the subcontinent. While recent intellectual as well as political history often places this discussion within a broader transnational conversation around class struggle, there is also renewed interest in [revising](#) this hypothesis. The conversation around class or race is redefined brilliantly in the context of the [black radical tradition](#) in Europe and its colonies through the idea of racial capitalism. However, in the context of the subcontinent – which has its pre-colonial capitalist history of caste hierarchy – the argument regarding the interlinking between caste and class is still alive and well. Caste as a conversation in Pakistan within academic circles or in popular discourse does not take up as much space as [it does in India](#). While all the reasons for this are beyond the scope of this reflection, one particular hypothesis that has governed this political question for years is the understanding of [caste as class](#).

Here, to reject the presence of caste as a significant social, political and economic category, the hermeneutic precepts of Islam are also increasingly taken as a response. That is to say, there is no caste in Islam. However, this contention has been challenged in [recent literature](#), and is being challenged considerably through transnational conversations emerging on caste due to transboundary and international activism. It is important to learn not just from conversations on racial capitalism but also through how these conversations have been taken further in the context of caste by leading Indian scholars who describe the relationship between class and caste as intricately embedded with each other in the history of the subcontinent. The research on how capitalism operates through both the intersections of public and private actors across different institutions of the state can also be rethought through an approach of caste and class as embedded with each other as the basis for social ordering in Pakistani society. Here we can rethink what we mean by the Old Order beyond 'dynastic politics' through sociological and empirical studies that consider more widely the Old Order as caste networks at the intersections of power during and leading up to the making of the Pakistani nation-state. Importantly, such studies would open up the question of how this Old Order intersects with the Military Order, through for example historical comparisons of how the East India Company and later the British would draw on and entrench caste consciousness to build and utilize the military for their governance over the subcontinent.

The International Order: The Empire as a Conspiracy

A significant contribution to the discourse on the role of the international order in these events is Khan's own claims about foreign intervention. As per Khan, the 'establishment' had orders from the United States Office of the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs to remove Khan from Office. After some Pakistani intellectuals and activists weighed in on the regime change, Noam Chomsky [opined](#) his scepticism on the notion of American involvement in the regime change. This was an affirmation for those who welcomed the change, and a disappointment for those who flew the banner of '*imported government nahi chahyey*' (we do not want an imported government). Questions about American imperialism are often received with a tinge of scepticism, sometimes relegated to conspiracy theories by popular columnists within and outside Pakistan. As far as the role of the international legal order is concerned, barring some focus on the [post-9/11 context](#) and critical legal work on [rights](#) and [gender](#), the history of Pakistan within the development of the international legal order has been one of missed opportunity.² International law as a discipline has been increasingly operationalized by either the military order or the technocratic cadre of policy experts. Both reiterate a particular imagination of the post-war liberal legal order reinforcing state power as part of a nationalistic discourse. While there is broader work on [Marxist thought in the history of the subcontinent and Pakistan](#), the [history](#) of Marxist movements in Pakistan from the 1960s to the 1980s correspond more closely to the international mobilisation of socialist movements in the global South that pushed against the Bretton Woods institutions, for example [communist political actors from Pakistan in the 1968 Cultural Congress of Havana](#). More recently, particularly after the 2008 financial crises, [new movements such as the Progressive Students Collective, the Haqooq-e-Khalq movement, and feminist socialist collectives such as Women's Democratic Front as well](#) as leftist academics have taken charge of educating and opposing IMF propositions in the last eight years, spearheading the critique against massive cuts on government spending on education as part of broader conditionality terms of the loans given to Pakistan. [Local scholarship](#) on imperialism and economic development, and broader conversations about the World Bank and IMF, have thus found new purchase in an incredibly austere economic environment in Pakistan following the biggest IMF bailout of USD 7.8 billion that Pakistan has opted for since its first agreement with IMF in 1958. The recent extension of the twenty-first bailout program, made in 2019 under Khan's government, has received another barrage of

² These recent pieces are an exception: Vanja Hamzić, 'Pakistan's Cold War(s) and International Law' in Matthew Carven, Sundhya Pahuja and Gerry Simpson (eds.), *International Law and the Cold War* (CUP 2019) 447; Muhammad Azeem, 'The State as a Political Practice: Pakistan's Postcolonial State beyond Dictatorship and Islam' (2020) 41:10 *Third World Quarterly* 670.

[criticisms warning of a 'debt trap'](#) with an institution that in Graeber's words '[comes back to break your legs](#)' if you don't pay back. For a country that has already been crippled, further debt is only making the most vulnerable a carcass for elites to perpetually feed from.

Charges of economic imperialism, particularly against international lenders such as the IMF, have been mobilized readily by those that are against the regime change and want to put forward a case for 'Islamic' thinking in opposition to 'secular', imperial intellectual, civil and political communities. It is then also not surprising that the recent turn towards an anti-imperial, non-western academic movement in Pakistan [has jumped on the global 'critical' bandwagon of decolonial thought](#).³ This turn towards anti-imperial, non-western academic thought instrumentalizes scholarship that has meticulously critiqued secular modernity and European political thought in thinking about and through Islam. This approach so far however relies only on arguments against Islamophobia, on [Critical Muslim Studies](#), and on critiques of secular thought – notably by [Talal Asad](#) and [Saba Mahmood](#) – as lynchpins for an ideological debate against modernist notions of liberal political and social life. In doing so, they often either become blind to internal critiques of what makes religion including Islam specific to local context and history, and how its histories in the local context intersect with other forms of social categories such as caste. In focusing on the idea of imperialism simply to provide a counter-discourse to 'secular' academic and activist thought, these discourses do not challenge the co-option of decolonial and postcolonial discourses. Thus, while thinking through Islamic epistemology as a [liberatory frame](#) has monumental potential to rethink social justice in the context of Pakistan, by being utilized for ideological battles it delves into a dangerous territory of co-optation similar to discourses of decolonisation used by the fascist Hindutva intelligentsia in India. The notion of empire becomes a discursive conspiracy as well as an ideological flashpoint for those that question the good of a liberal secular world order imagined in a Eurocentric postcolonial world.

Re-ordering Pakistan: Towards Grounded Alternate Imaginations

From a meta-register and an analytical point of view, the three orders – the military, the Old Order, and the international order – are not necessarily in opposition to each other. In the context of Pakistan, simply thinking against the secular liberal world order in isolation misses what could easily be seen as interconnected orders arranging and rearranging social and political life every day. At the centre of all three orders is the

³ Over the last year, I have facilitated a few such [events](#) at the Institute of Policy Studies, Islamabad; and other academic circles at the University of Punjab and Habib University have also held events on Islam and colonialism.

reconfiguration of social and political life through colonial domination, which facilitates and embeds the internalization of European colonial modernity. By exploring the connections between these orders in postcolonial Pakistan, we may also make far more imperative provocations in terms of how, as Eslava reminds us, the [local is connected to the global](#). In this context, how is everyday life configured through and by the international order and where do these different orders sit in relation to such a configuration? How does the military order, the Old (caste) Order and the international legal order mete out direct and indirect forms of violence and power in the everyday life of the Pakistani people? Careful attention to historical continuities between colonial rule, to the making of the nation-state of Pakistan, and to sociological realities that run through continuities such as caste can help us come up with more cohesive analytical frames that are grounded in the sociology of the country on its own terms. These could perhaps even enable the possibilities of conversation around important issues in Pakistan – whether social, economic or political.

While academic, policy and civil society discourse on Pakistan has been permeated with studies of 'radicalism', 'Islamism', and religious extremism, all these rest on [colonial notions of how religion is defined](#), understood and analysed in the modern secular episteme. Rethinking the interconnections of these orders allows us to examine how religion making within Pakistan – just like in India and beyond – is more syncretic and fluid on the ground. This reconceptualization has to be sensitive to the role religion-making plays in state power but also how it is intricately linked to social power and identity, particularly through its intersections with gender and caste. By redefining the idea of religion through caste within Pakistan, we can also see how that changes the way we talk about 'minority' rights. We can further think about how different institutional powers are structured through ideas of religion-making that is tied to caste, and how that operates at different scalar registers such as the local, national and international. There is opportunity to draw the connection between technocratic experts, political and business caste elites, and the military as a postcolonial institution in the development of the state of Pakistan, and how this development is guided and connected with broader conversations on developmentalism as a civilising mission from a TWAIL perspective. Unless we use alternate locally grounded imaginations to further our understanding of historical continuities and rethink the presumptions of colonial categories – with local sociologies in mind – we might find ourselves stuck perpetually in the disorder of things.