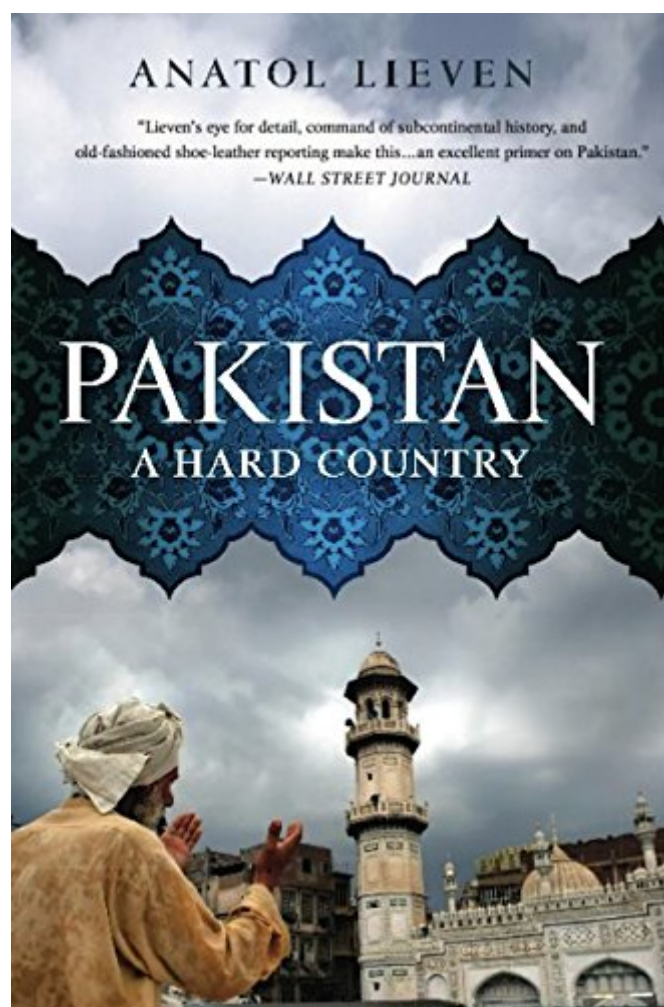


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Pakistan: A Hard Country



Synopsis

In the past decade Pakistan has become a country of immense importance to its region, the United States, and the world. With almost 200 million people, a 500,000-man army, nuclear weapons, and a large diaspora in Britain and North America, Pakistan is central to the hopes of jihadis and the fears of their enemies. Yet the greatest short-term threat to Pakistan is not Islamist insurgency as such, but the actions of the United States, and the greatest longterm threat is ecological change. Anatol Lieven's book is a magisterial investigation of this highly complex and often poorly understood country. Engagingly written, combining history and profound analysis with reportage from Lieven's extensive travels as a journalist and academic, Pakistan: A Hard Country is both utterly compelling and deeply revealing.

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Customer Reviews

In addition to the subtitle "A Hard Country" could also be added a "Complex Country". Mr. Lieven gives us Pakistan from that country's viewpoint and that is the great strength of this book. We are presented with a turbulent multi-layered portrayal of a country surrounded by enemies (like India), unfriendly countries (like Iran) or failed states (like Afghanistan). Within Pakistan (with a population of close to 200 million) there are so many diverse groups competing with each other (sometimes violently) that it sometimes puts Pakistan's very survival in jeopardy. As Mr. Lieven points out there

are so many disparate Islamic groups and ethnicities that it is a misconception of Western countries that Pakistan is on the verge of becoming an Islamic State like Saudi Arabia. In fact, Pakistan is a veritable marketplace of different brands of Islam. At this stage the Taleban (spelt in this book with an "e" instead of an "i") would be unable to overthrow the government. They may be powerful in the ungoverned FATA and NWFP provinces, but aside from terrorist attacks they have not made significant inroads in the main provinces of Punjab and Sindh - actually the army has taken significant containment steps. The Talebans' austere brand of Islam would not sit well with the abundant Islamic groups who worship saints and shrines. But this book still gives a gloomy view of the country - a state befuddled by corruption, patronage and an inept judicial system (that inadvertently promotes Taleban quick justice). It is also a state swept up in delusional paranoia that believes, among other delusions, that the Sept. 11 attacks were done by Israel, the Bush administration...

If I had to review the book 'Pakistan: A Hard Country' in one line I would say it is brilliant. The book is well researched, informative, insightful, but most of all for a country that finds itself often in headline news for the wrong reasons, empathetic. Pakistan is an enigma for even its own citizens. Mr Lieven loosens the knot of this enigma one thread at a time. Lieven has spent many years in the country and the region as a journalist. The network, knowledge and understanding he has assembled is evident each page of the book. What is more, he explains the country not just to western readers. His analysis opens new space for Pakistani readers too. Lieven leads the reader through an apparent chaotic labyrinth that for many defines Pakistan. Step by step, he picks up each strand of the country's many facets: its politics, social structure, economy and security to weave a narrative that explains a country and its many problems. Pakistan's apparent follies no longer remain unique to the country. Its rent seeking and insensitive elite has its counterparts in many countries around the world. Its citizens' penchant to put the blame for all of the country's problems on foreign governments and their inability to own up to responsibility too is not unusual. Lieven contextualizes Pakistani attitudes in its social structure. He dedicates chapters to each of Pakistan's four provinces. They reveal a country diverse in many ways and yet integrated by common values and shared insecurities. Among all these currents, Lieven leaves the reader reassured. Despite many natural disasters and challenges resulting from the follies of its governing class, the Pakistani people retain their heads above water.

This timely book has its merits and could undoubtedly contribute to a more nuanced interpretation of

events in this important country. One can only hope that people involved in the foreign policy of the United States take note as one message that Mr. Lieven does get across is that a US-military intervention in Pakistan would have disastrous consequences for the whole of Southeast Asia. Mr. Lieven explains the very big social and ethnic differences which characterise the 4 states which constitute Pakistan. Every observer should take these into account before drawing any conclusions on events in this 'hard' and fascinating country. Terrorist attacks by the Taliban in Pathan-dominated regions have entirely different motives than for instance attacks by Baluchistan terrorists, financed by India. Lieven illustrates very well how institutions (such as a judicial system, politics...), which characterize democratic countries have been adapted and perverted in Pakistan into something which cannot contribute to the efficient functioning of a modern state. Corruption and patronage seems to be intimately linked to politics and the judicial system seems to act inherently slow and to benefit only the rich... The merit of this book is to underline this and should help Western journalists not to draw the wrong, tendentious conclusions. The success of the Taliban in imposing shariah in the tribal areas, is for quite a lot of Western journalists an illustration of the dangers of this awful repressive and regressive regime. Lieven shows however that in the mainly Pathan-dominated regions the local population simply prefers to replace the state judicial system by a system which is experienced as faster and more just.

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