

UM Pakistan Conference 2013 Report

by Sharik Bashir; edited by Farina Mir

On Friday 5 April 2013, the University of Michigan's Center for South Asian Studies and Pakistani Students' Association co-hosted a Pakistan Conference. The speakers included emerging and established scholars, a journalist, and a human rights lawyer. The discussion this year was based on a theme of human rights in Pakistan, organized into three panels: the politics of human rights, poverty as a human rights concern and international law and the cost of drone warfare. The discussion was drawn to a close by the eminent Pakistan scholar, Professor Ayesha Jalal. The conference was well-attended, with over 100 people (students, faculty, and community members) attending each of the panels.

Panel 1: Democratic transitions: the politics of human rights

Speaking on the panel were Professor Mariam Mufti, Assistant Professor of Politics at the University of Oklahoma and author of the forthcoming book, *Political Parties in Pakistan*, and Professor Saadia Toor, Associate Professor of Sociology at the College of Staten Island and author of *State of Islam*.

The panel began with Professor Mufti who brought attention to the flaws in the democratic institutions in Pakistan and the nature of the democracy and political parties that make up the civilian structure. Her focus was on whether Pakistan qualifies as a democracy, and an explanation on the manner in which the different political parties campaign during elections and win votes. She spoke about how the manifestos of each party are just a list of all the problems in Pakistan without setting any priorities. The manifestos are not focused on the pertinent issues that require immediate attention and are verbose and lengthy making them practically impossible for an average voter to understand. She also mentioned the weakness of party structures in Pakistan and the lack of a regional setup for any of the political parties. She elaborated on the nature of politics in Pakistan where parties are full of 'electable' candidates who can win seats but do not follow any particular party ideological line.

Second to speak on the panel was Professor Saadia Toor, who argued that "democracy is a process rather than a state." She spoke about weaknesses in Pakistan's maturing democracy and said it is a system in which the strong prevail over the weak. She touched on how democracy has been bogged down by religious legislation that was passed by previous leaders in Pakistan, which has led to an unchallenged growth in religious extremism and violence. Professor Toor clarified the very disturbing reality of Pakistan, a country in which religious extremists operate with impunity and are funded by wealthy Gulf oil states. Professor Toor also spoke about human rights violations against minorities and women in Pakistan. She traced this back to the formation of the state and the involvement of non-democratic forces in that process. Even though some grassroots movements have emerged in Pakistan which shows signs of a strengthening civil society, Professor Toor expressed belief in the fact that an end to the war in Afghanistan and the subsequent subduing of religious extremism is a necessary condition to the democratization of Pakistan.

Panel 2: Poverty as a human rights concern

Speaking on the panel was Professor Anjum Altaf, the Dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Lahore University of Management Sciences, who had come from Lahore, Pakistan to participate in the conference. To address poverty alleviation Professor Altaf emphasized the need for empowering labor. Professor Altaf's talk was based on a very interesting comparative analysis between Pakistan and other emerging nations. He drew on a quote from B.R. Ambedkar about India to illustrate a similar difficulty in Pakistan today: Ambedkar noted that after partition India had "transitioned to one man one vote and not one man one value." The reason Professor Altaf gave for the lower value placed on the lives of the lower classes is the lack of any social revolution, the kind that Europe had seen. Professor Altaf pointed out that it is in the best interest for all nations to share the burden of growth and as Professor Toor had mentioned in her presentation, he also stressed the importance of grassroots movements. Professor Altaf recognized that there is not one universal method to achieving poverty alleviation and said the best model for Pakistan would be the Chinese model, which is to generate as many jobs as possible. He pointed out the inherent flaws in current methods such as the Benazir Income Support Programme. He stressed that every country has grown behind the walls of protectionism, but Pakistan cannot generate any jobs when there is such low literacy. He mentioned that there are many obstacles and challenges to poverty alleviation and alluded to India where after so many years of democracy, poverty alleviation was incredibly slow. He said "we cannot use the same paradigms" everywhere. He concluded by saying that fighting poverty requires a concentrated population in certain constituencies and movements from below.

Panel 3: International law and the costs of drone warfare

The speakers on the third and final panel were Professor James Cavallaro, the Director of the Stanford Law Human Rights Clinic and coauthor of the important report, *Living Under Drones*, and Ms. Madiha Tahir, an independent journalist and author of "dispatches from Pakistan."

The discussion kicked off with the "living under drones" documentary video that laid down the facts and numbers about the drone warfare carried out by the C.I.A. in Pakistan. Professor Cavallaro went on to elaborate on how drones produce widespread negative sentiment towards America. He questioned the popular narrative in the United States that underplays the costs of the drone warfare. Professor Cavallaro pointed out that there has been a lot of misinformation about the issue in mainstream American media. He asked questions about the implications of drone warfare in the geopolitical, ethical and legal sense. The constant presence of drones buzzing in the air keeps the people living in the northern regions of Pakistan in constant fear. He talked about how people had to change their entire way of life because of the presence of drones. Professor Cavallaro focused on the ambiguity surrounding the question of whether someone is a militant or not. Professor Cavallaro stressed the need for U.S. citizens to look at the bigger picture and not just simply be concerned about the rights of U.S. citizens. He concluded by saying that drone warfare threatens the democratic stability in Pakistan and that it had escalated in times of poor bilateral relations, suggesting that it is used as a tool to strong-arm Pakistan.

In her self-produced emotionally moving documentary, "Wounds of Waziristan", Ms. Tahir gave a human face to the victims of drone warfare. She had them share their stories, their concerns and their grievances. She gave a name to the numbers that were presented in Professor Cavallaro's presentation,

which immediately preceded hers. The victims described in gruesome and heartbreaking detail what life is like under drones. Ms. Tahir put all the stereotypes of people belonging to the FATA region (where the majority of drone warfare is carried out), such as being savage, uncivilized, and lawless in historical context. The words “remote” and “lawless” are incessantly repeated in mainstream media when talking about FATA. Ms. Tahir mentioned the effort in America to make drone strikes more transparent but the people afflicted by the drones do not care for transparency and accountability. They simply want it to stop and with each passing day they grow more distraught. Ms. Tahir emphasized that the solution to this issue should not be thought of in legal terms but in ethical terms. She signed off with a question that stirred the audience’s thoughts and emotions. If everything was legal would the war still be just?

Comment: Professor Ayesha Jalal

In her concluding comment, Professor Ayesha Jalal of Tufts University said that in order for Pakistan to advance, the citizenry needs to be educated for its own well-being. Informed decisions need to be made. We need to be thinking more about the informal arenas of politics. Professor Jalal acknowledged the challenges ahead and said democratization and the fight for human rights is a long process. Representatives need to be held accountable for their actions. Without opportunities for the underprivileged, Professor Jalal explained that the country cannot progress. Referencing Professor Altaf’s speech, Professor Jalal agreed that movements from below are necessary to gaining human rights in Pakistan. She also blamed America for its strong complicity in suppressing democracy in Pakistan and therefore not allowing a civil structure to form—a civil structure that is at the heart of every democracy and is the path to achieving human rights.