



Playing with Fire: Pakistan at War with Itself

By Pamela Constable



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In this richly reported and movingly written chronicle, Constable takes us on a panoramic tour of contemporary Pakistan, exploring the fears and frustrations, dreams and beliefs, that animate the lives of ordinary citizens in this nuclear-armed nation of 170 million. From the opulent, insular salons of the elite to the brick quarries where soot-covered workers sell their kidneys to get out of debt, this is a haunting portrait of a society riven by inequality and corruption, and increasingly divided by competing versions of Islam.

Beneath the façade of democracy in Pakistan, Constable reveals the formidable hold of its business, bureaucratic, and military elites—including the country's powerful spy agency, the ISI. This is a society where the majority of the population feels powerless, and radical Islamist groups stoke popular resentment to recruit shock troops for global jihad. Writing with an uncommon ear for the nuances of this conflicted culture, Constable explores the extent to which faith permeates every level of Pakistani society—and the ambivalence many Muslims feel about the role it *should* play in the life of the nation.

Both an empathic and alarming look inside one of the world's most violent and vexing countries, *Playing with Fire* is essential reading for anyone wishing to understand modern Pakistan and its momentous role on today's global stage.

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Editorial Review

Review

Advance praise for *Playing with Fire*

“Pamela Constable, one of the world’s leading reporters on South Asia, has distilled her many years of reporting on Pakistan and turned them into an accessible and well-written account that illuminates one of the world’s most opaque countries. Constable does that by meeting and understanding all sorts of Pakistanis from rural laborers who live like serfs to their feudal politician bosses. Her book is a key to understanding this much misunderstood country.”—Peter L. Bergen, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Longest War* and *Holy War, Inc.*

“Pamela Constable has woven the fabric of Pakistan into an engrossing and vivid portrait of a country dangerously on the edge. With empathy yet unblinking candor, Constable exposes the powerful rifts tearing Pakistan apart and delivers a sobering warning about the future of both state and society.”—David E. Hoffman, Pulitzer Prize–winning author of *The Dead Hand: The Untold Story of the Cold War Arms Race and Its Dangerous Legacy*

“Pakistan has become one of the great problem-countries for the world, especially for the United States which did much to help it but also much to create the present malformed state. Pamela Constable has written the best introduction yet to this troubled and troublesome country, where the very idea of Pakistan is in tatters and the state is failing. Her emphasis on the powerlessness of ordinary Pakistanis, the cupidity of its political and military institutions, and the head-in-the-sand attitude of Pakistan’s elites is alarming but accurate. Not bogged down in detail, this is the best overview of Pakistan yet published.”—Stephen P. Cohen, senior fellow, Foreign Policy Studies, The Brookings Institution

About the Author

Pamela Constable is a foreign correspondent and former deputy foreign editor at *The Washington Post*. Since 1998, she has reported extensively from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and India as well as Iraq. Before joining the *Post* in 1994, she was a foreign correspondent and foreign policy reporter for *The Boston Globe*, where she covered South and Central America for a decade, focusing on Chile and Haiti, as well as parts of Asia and the former Soviet Union. Constable is author of *Fragments of Grace: My Search for Meaning in the Strife of South Asia* and co-author of *A Nation of Enemies: Chile Under Pinochet*. A graduate of Brown University, she is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, a winner of the Maria Moors Cabot Prize, and a former fellow at the Alicia Patterson Foundation and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. She is the founder of the Afghan Stray Animal League, which operates a shelter and clinic for needy small animals in Kabul.

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chapter 1
the flood

Each summer, when the monsoon rains arrive, millions of villagers across Pakistan celebrate the drenching downpour that brings welcome refreshment from long sweltering days in the fields and long restless nights in rooms with no fan to stir the heat. But when the monsoon came in June 2010, relief quickly turned to panic.

This time the rain was heavier than anyone could remember, and it did not stop. The Indus and Sindh rivers, usually half parched and harmless, rose and spilled over their banks. Water broke through earthen dikes and spread across fields where rice, wheat, cotton, and sugarcane were ripening for harvest.

The rains and flooding continued for weeks, transforming fertile fields into vast stagnant lakes and reducing mud-walled farm compounds to tiny islands. Families perched on trees and rooftops, waiting for rescue by army boats and helicopters, and watched helplessly as their terrified goats and buffaloes were swept away by the surging waters. “There was a woman clinging to a tree trunk with water all around her. She was holding a baby in her arms,” said Ashraf Jatoi, a local official in southern Punjab. “We told her to reach out and grab our hands, but the water was very deep and fast. The baby slipped and was carried away,” he said, still shaken weeks after the experience. “She kept crying, ‘My boy, save my boy.’ There was nothing we could do but put her in the boat and take her to safety.”

More than eighteen hundred people lost their lives in the floods. More than a million and a half lost their homes. Several million more fled to higher ground, hastily piling bed frames and cooking pots and infants onto bullock and donkey carts. They trudged across the sodden land in a ponderous human exodus that looked very much like Partition, the vast and chaotic spasm of migratory flight that had accompanied Pakistan’s abrupt separation from India and its violent birth as a nation sixty-three years before.

Between June and September, more than five million acres—about 20 percent of Pakistan’s arable land—was inundated and rendered temporarily barren. International lending institutions estimated that almost \$10 billion worth of damage was done to roads, buildings, bridges, and irrigation systems. Pakistan officials said \$40 billion in long-term agricultural production had been lost.

As the rain swelled riverine systems to bursting and the cataclysmic tide swept across the agricultural landscape, it disrupted communities, livelihoods, and systems that had governed rural life for generations. And as television crews sent back dramatic footage of rooftop rescues, flooded farms, and desperate flight, the coverage exposed the depth and breadth of Pakistan’s rural poverty—a phenomenon that to the world, and to many Pakistanis as well, had been largely invisible.

The floods reinforced some stereotypes about Pakistan and shattered others. They provoked an outpouring of compassion from a society often accused of selfishness and indifference to the poor, but they also highlighted the inadequacy of civilian authorities to deal with a major crisis, giving the army an opportunity to demonstrate its superior capabilities and burnish its historic self-image as a national savior. Islamic groups, some of them violent extremists, rushed in to provide relief and support for flood victims, improving their public credibility and associating their names with compassion, while the country’s elected president left an indelible image of remote disengagement at the top of Pakistani democracy, helicoptering to a vacation in his luxurious villa in the north of France while the floods rose at home.

International donors were wary and grudging. Foreign governments were concerned about Pakistan’s reputation for rampant corruption and feared much of the aid would never reach the victims. Sympathy was also dampened by the growing number of terrorist attacks abroad traced back to Pakistani sources. In a country of enormous unmet potential, founded as an experiment in Muslim democracy but increasingly identified with suicide bombings, honor killings, military coups, and nuclear rivalry, the floods added a new catastrophe to the list—and became a metaphor for everything that had failed in Pakistan during half a century. In August I spent two weeks wandering through the flood zones of Punjab and Sindh.

In many places the water had receded and the danger had passed, but a more profound and far-reaching despair had set in. In Punjab, a riverside town resembled Pompeii, with streets of knee-deep mud where

fishing boats were stranded at odd angles. Cornfields had been churned into sandbars and canals overflowed with useless, contaminated water. Farmers lost a lifetime of toil and investment, the animals they had tended for years swept away forever and the fields they had plowed a hundred times covered with stagnant black water. A leathery, sunburned man in Kot Adoo, wearing a stained tunic and waiting in line for a relief ration card, wept as he recounted how he had watched from a roof while his two goats and only buffalo were carried off by the current, struggling and bleating, until they vanished in the storm. “It was very hard. They were my savings and my income, but I also felt a kind of love for them,” he admitted shyly. The other men in line looked haggard and dirty, as if they had neither slept nor washed since the floods had driven them from home a month before. When asked what their greatest problem was, they said they were desperate to find fodder for the animals they had managed to save. “My buffaloes are groaning from hunger. We go out and scavenge in the fields, but the land has been ruined and there is not enough,” said one.

In Sindh I walked through a vast, historic cemetery in the town of Thatta where hundreds of displaced families had camped among the tombstones. Volunteer doctors from a religious charity were dispensing cough syrup and antibiotics in a tent, and snake charmers were trying to coax life into a pair of exhausted cobras in a basket, hoping to make a few rupees from the refugees. An hour away was a fishing village on the edge of the Sindh River, where not a single hut had been left standing. A small girl was washing dishes among the reeds. Half a dozen young men were diving for fish in a stretch of water that had once been a road. An old man was darning a torn net he was not sure he would ever use again. “I spent my entire life on the water, and I have never been afraid of it until now,” he said.

On the outskirts of Karachi, where a dozen makeshift camps had been set up in vacant fields, I met displaced families from northern Sindh, where flooding had wiped out dozens of villages. They huddled in a daze, with little to do but calm their fretting children and wait. As they told their stories of escape and loss, what struck me were the harsh conditions of their lives before the floods—lives of permanent debt, primitive routine, customary constraint, political powerlessness, and economic immobility. Many had come from some of the poorest and most neglected districts in the country. One of them, Jacobabad, was found in a 2010 survey to have the lowest literacy rate in Sindh, followed closely by the surrounding districts. Some of the worst-inundated areas had no drinking water systems, and victims stranded by floodwaters also suffered from thirst. These Pakistanis had few skills, no plans, and no communities left.

The floods left huge swaths of cropland unusable for years, widening the gulf between feudal owners, who could easily survive their losses, and peasants and small farmers, who were wiped out. One older couple, Pura and Bannu Jawan, had lived in a mud hut in Shikarpur District. They and their sons tended 10 acres of wheat for a landlord who owned 300. They earned no wages but received 900 kilograms of wheat at harvest time. Water was always in short supply, and they had to spend 1,500 rupees each week on fuel to operate an irrigation pump. Their only valuable possessions were a few thousand rupees in savings and Bannu’s wedding jewelry, which they kept in a metal trunk. When the flood warnings came, an army truck whisked them to a nearby town for safety. Their son and daughter-in-law went back to look for the money and ornaments but never returned. Now their home was a sweltering tent with a sleeping, orphaned grandson.

In the next tent was a younger couple with eight children. No one in the family had ever been to school. The husband, Azeem, said he wanted to go home and see if his land was still there. The wife, Hani, was silent at first, but suddenly she spoke up. “I want my children to be civilized,” she said. “In our tribe children only memorize the Koran, but there is a school in this camp. My husband says he is too old to learn, but people who read can shop better and learn the news, and the landlord’s men can’t cheat them on the grain shares. If this flood has brought us to a school, then maybe it is God’s plan.”

Most major news in Pakistan comes from its volatile, densely packed cities—suicide bombings in Karachi,

protest marches in Lahore, teeming refugee camps in Peshawar. But almost two-thirds of Pakistan's inhabitants, more than 120 million people, still live in rural areas, and 87 million make their living straight from the land. Agriculture dominates the national economy, with crop production and livestock contributing 31 percent of the total gross domestic product (GDP). Of the four provinces, Punjab and Sindh are the big breadbaskets and export producers, with hundreds of thousands of acres planted in cotton and food crops.

In 2008–9, Pakistan produced 50 million tons of sugarcane, 24 million tons of wheat, 11.7 million bales of cotton, and 6 million tons of rice. Much of Pakistan is extremely arid, and its crops are heavily dependent on man-made irrigation, including an elaborate system of canals built by the British a century ago. It also faces a chronic water shortage that is becoming more acute each year and that could seriously jeopardize its ability to feed a population that continues to grow at more than 3 percent a year. Some analysts call water scarcity the single greatest threat to Pakistan's stability and survival.

The water crisis has been aggravated by official corruption and indifference, global warming, interprovincial rivalries, resistance to dam construction, and poor canal maintenance. One of Pakistan's major water sources is the Indus River, which originates in India. Its flow is apportioned according to a bilateral treaty, but Pakistan often accuses India of diverting water, and Islamic extremist groups have begun capitalizing on the emotional issue. The Indus first reaches Punjab, the richest agricultural province, then flows on down to the poorer and drier lands of Sindh. In 2009, one economic report said the mighty Indus had "shrunk to a canal, and in some areas shriveled to little more than a puddle."

The terrible irony of the next monsoon was that it turned the useless puddle into a destructive sea. At the time of Partition, land ownership in Pakistan was highly concentrated among a few families, with about 7 percent of farms occupying more than half the arable land and a handful of vast feudal estates accounting for one-third. In the 1950s and 1970s, two modest land reform programs broke up many large holdings, and today 93 percent of Pakistani farms are less than 10 acres in size. Yet many wealthy landowning families were able to skirt these limitations by parceling out property among dozens of relatives.

Today large plantations still occupy 40 percent of the total cultivated area, and the power of the landlord clans is reinforced by their continued dominance in regional and national politics. Pakistan has made impressive strides in reducing the level of absolute poverty, measured by individual calorie consumption, from more than two-thirds of the populace in the 1980s to less than 30 percent today. It is not a nation of starving people, though many Pakistanis rarely eat eggs or meat and subsist mainly on sugared tea and chappatis (wheat pancakes fried in oil), which they use to mop up dal, a lentil gruel with onions and chili peppers for spice. But most Pakistani poverty is rural, and most rural Pakistanis are poor—field hands who receive abysmally low wages, tenant farmers paid in crop shares, migrant laborers permanently in debt to their bosses, and millions of small independent farmers who survive at the mercy of weather, pests, world food price fluctuations, and natural disasters such as the monsoon floods of 2010.

Despite the formal breakup of feudal lands, the feudal mind-set persists—especially in southern Punjab and northern Sindh—perpetuating the wide social gulf between peon and patron, and reinforcing the bonds of paternalism and loyalty that keep many illiterate villagers trapped on the land rather than seeking education and opportunities elsewhere. Most rural Pakistanis live and die in small, circumscribed worlds that have barely changed for generations. Often their children do not attend school, or drop out after a few years. Families need them to work in the fields and may see little benefit in sending them to class. Girls are married off early to keep them chaste and safe within the clan. Teachers are hard to recruit and keep in remote areas, and thousands of rural "ghost" schools sit empty, while bureaucrats collect their operating fees.

The result is abysmal rural literacy rates and a burgeoning population of unskilled young people who will

probably never rise above their parents' learning or earning levels. The national literacy rate is officially 57 percent, but it is only 36 percent for women.

In some rural areas of Sindh and Balochistan, less than 20 percent of women are able to read, add and subtract, or even write their name. The situation is even worse in the northwest tribal areas, where militant groups often recruit unoccupied young men from poor villages. In a 2010 poll conducted for the New America Foundation in the tribal areas, only 20 percent of adult respondents said they worked full-time, less than half said they had finished sixth grade, and fully 29 percent said they had never attended school at all. Rural life has other priorities. It is ruled by the changing seasons and by unquestioned traditions of honor, duty, and vengeance. Villagers are subject to the decisions of the waderas, hereditary rural chiefs, and sardars, hereditary tribal leaders. In the rural areas, people are bound together by the traditions and kinship of their baraderi, a word whose definition lies somewhere between "caste" and "brotherhood."

Daily activities are divided by gender. Men gather at mosques or elders' homes to discuss marriage alliances and disputes with neighboring clans. Women rarely leave their homes and never mingle with unrelated men. Families are happy if a son is born healthy or a daughter is engaged; they are unhappy if a new calf dies of colic or the landlord's bookkeeper cheats on their share of the crop.

The old nomenclature persists too, although it represents a dying way of life. Landless peasants are still known as haris and landowners as zamindars, although some zamindars are also waderas, which makes them responsible for handling the problems of haris in their area: property disputes, illness, debts, crimes, and family crises. Even today, many haris have never been to school, never owned a plot of land, and never earned more than a few hundred dollars or a few sacks of grain for a year's hard toil. They may own a cow or a buffalo, which they have borrowed heavily to purchase, but their only luxuries are likely to be an electric fan or a bicycle. They turn to their baraderi elders for advice and to the landlord for loans. At election time, they usually vote for the candidates their elders support, and in return they are guaranteed a patron to intervene on their behalf with the police and unblock bureaucratic hurdles. They do not make news, hold protests, travel farther than the nearest city, or dare imagine any other life.

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