Understanding Islam & Politics: Analyzing Confessional Parties

WASHINGTON D.C. — When one considers religion and politics in Pakistan, images of extremism and violence tend to come to mind—like the assassination of Benazir Bhutto or of Salmaan Taseer. However, such a limited view of the political landscape of Pakistan gets in the way of our ability to better understand the country as a whole and its people as individuals. Incorrectly believing that political Islamism is driven by economic disenfranchisement and militaristic zeal, Western officials have begun to limit or weaken confessional Islamic parties instead of attempting to foster them as important potential allies in the fight against terrorism.

Addressing this oversight is Haroon K. Ullah’s new book Vying for Allah’s Vote: Understanding Islamic Parties, Political Violence, and Extremism in Pakistan. For this work, Dr. Ullah did extensive on-the-ground research on confessional parties in Pakistan by looking at their voters, their politics, their tactics to win elections, and what leads some to moderation and others to extremes. Perhaps surprising to some Americans is how familiar his findings sound. Islamists have been successful thanks to their door-to-door canvassing to help decide which districts to invest in and their very effective social media campaigns. These parties are not solely driven by a religious agenda—in fact, they are pragmatic and approach politics similar to secular parties.

However, just as American candidates play to their base during the primaries and then move to the center for the general election, Pakistani candidates may say one thing while campaigning and act rather differently once they are elected. The country continues its rightward shift and Pakistani politicians tend to pander to religious extremism. But, an impending theocracy seems incredibly unlikely. Pakistan’s political parties—whether secular, Muslim democratic, or Islamist—are far too diverse, competitive, and fractious to submit easily to even religiously unimpeachable single-party rule.

Pakistan’s Islamic parties are foundational to the nation itself and its democratic political process. These parties will remain an integral fixture of the political landscape regardless of Western efforts to eradicate them or limit their growth. Dr. Ullah’s improved understanding of the range of parties is critical for knowing how Western nations can best engage states with strong Islamic political parties like in the case of Egypt and Tunisia.

Haroon K. Ullah is a staff adviser to the US State Department and was a member of the late Ambassador Richard C. Holbrooke’s policy team on Pakistan and Afghanistan. His work focuses on democratization, security studies, and political party dynamics. He has a master’s degree in public policy and international development from Harvard University and holds a joint PhD in political science and public policy from the University of Michigan.

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Advance Praise for *Vying for Allah’s Vote*

“Though they are relatively small in size, Pakistan’s Islamist parties play an outsize role in the policies and politics of one of the globe’s most important countries. Haroon Ullah has done us all a great service by writing a deeply reported, fluidly written account of how these parties work as well as the effects of Islamists on Pakistan’s body politic and how they affect the geopolitics of South Asia writ large. He also considers what lessons Pakistan’s Islamists might have for the Islamists in the Arab world who have been thrust into the real world of politics by the uprisings of the Arab Spring. *Vying for Allah’s Vote* is an important study for all serious students of Islamism.” —Peter Bergen, director of the national security program at the New America Foundation, The New America Foundation

“Haroon Ullah has vividly humanized the challenge Pakistan faces in the explosive mixture of religion and politics. Ullah brings the expertise of a scholar with first-hand knowledge of the country and culture and the perspective on US policy of a diplomat who was a member the late Richard Holbrooke’s ‘AfPak’ team. The result is authoritative, insightful, and timely.” —Strobe Talbott, President, The Brookings Institution

“While others are content simply to label Pakistan ‘the world’s most dangerous place,’ Haroon Ullah has patiently studied the political groups behind the headlines and written a book that explains them cogently and clearly. Those who want to see a peaceful and prosperous Pakistan, and to face its many problems head on, must read Ullah’s work; understanding its complex politics is the first step toward building the Pakistan its people—and its friends—should want.” —Cameron Munter, former US Ambassador to Pakistan

“Pakistan is a rare case where unresolved issues about relations of Islam to politics intersect with democratic development. *Vying for Allah’s Vote* provides a valuable glimpse into how Islamic party politics in Pakistan has influenced the development of political platforms and how Islam and democracy are likely to impact one another. Insightful and informative.” —Vali Nasr, dean of The John Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies and author of The Shia Revival and Forces of Fortune

“An insightful study of the complexities of Islamic parties in Pakistan with useful and clear recommendations for American policy.” —Bruce Reidel, director, The Brookings Intelligence Project
“We finally have a senior Pakistani-American diplomat commenting on the explosive interaction between the state, democracy, and religion in a Muslim country—and Haroon Ullah delivers. He offers an insightful and nuanced perspective that benefits from his deep knowledge and experience in the field. As nothing can be more important to the US than building bridges with the Muslim world, this book is essential reading for anyone who wishes to understand a major Muslim country like Pakistan and the challenges it faces today.” — Akbar Ahmed, Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies at American University and former Pakistan High Commissioner to the United Kingdom

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Haroon K. Ullah is an international scholar, US diplomat, and field researcher specializing in South Asia and the Middle East. Haroon currently serves on Secretary Kerry’s Policy Planning Staff at the U.S. State Department, where he focuses on public diplomacy and countering violent extremism. He grew up in a farming community in Washington State and was trained at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government. At Harvard, he served as a senior Belfer fellow and completed his MPA. He has a PhD from the University of Michigan and was a William J. Fulbright Fellow, a Harvard University Presidential Scholar, a National Security Education Program Fellow and a Woodrow Wilson Public Service Fellow. Haroon is author of *Vying for Allah’s Vote* (Georgetown University Press, 2014) and *Bargain from The Bazaar* (Public Affairs Books, 2014).

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