

# We can make it work

There are many reasons to fear for Pakistan's future but, argues the author of this timely study, it is a nation of surprising resilience

## CHRISTINA LAMB.

### PAKISTAN: A Hard Country

by ANATOL LIEVEN

Allen Lane £30 pp560

For a country described by President Obama as "a cancer" and Madeleine Albright as "an international migraine", there are remarkably few books on Pakistan. Six times the population of Afghanistan, two thirds of the entire Arab world, the sanctuary for Osama bin Laden and the Taliban, with 100 or so nuclear weapons thrown in, it's clearly somewhere we need to worry about.

Add to this volatile mix that Pakistan is bankrupt, running out of water, its education system so appalling that half its school-age children cannot read a sentence, and growing so fast that, according to the World Bank, by 2050 its population will be 555m. By any measure it's in a dire state. Yet, as Anatol Lieven argues persuasively in this important book, it's not about to fall apart.

Pakistan's surprising resilience was summed up for me when I arrived there on a visit just after the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in 2007, when her home province of Sindh was in flames and the western media full of apocalyptic warnings that the country could break up. I jumped in a cab at Lahore

airport and asked that journalistic staple, the taxi driver, what he thought of the situation. "Pakistan — big problem," he replied. "Yes," I agreed, expecting him to talk of the terrorist attacks, political turmoil, lack of security. "We have no discos," was his complaint.

As a former journalist turned professor, Lieven has written a book that is more acidic than anecdote, and it is heavy-going at times. That's not to say there isn't plenty of fascinating detail: he has talked to hundreds of people across Pakistan, from tax collectors with "the easiest job in the world" (only 1% pay taxes) to courts in Baluchistan where complainants pay numerous bribes to be heard. He has visited Sufi shrines and gone boar-hunting with a feudal lord.

The nightmare scenario for policymakers in the West is that Pakistan will fall into the grip of Islamic revolution. Lieven argues this will not happen because Pakistanis cannot unite behind anything, so divided are they by what he calls kinship or local clans. But what saves it from Islamist takeover also frustrates any attempt at reform or education.

He paints a picture of a society where everyone, even those supposedly working for the government, such as police, tax inspectors and judges, are working for themselves or these local dynasties. These are often referred to as feudals, but Lieven rightly points out that many of these figures are actually industrialists. It is these local powerbrokers rather than the state that deliver



ARSHAD ARBAB, EPA

**Collapse: a youth hears news of a relative's death in a suicide bomb, Peshawar, 2011**

is the army that should take responsibility for the parlous state of today's Pakistan. Were it not for the army always waiting in the wings, perhaps the politicians might move from short-term personal advantage toward a longer-term view for the good of the country.

This is a much-needed book, written with deep understanding and affection for the country. However, Pakistan has a dark side of which we get too little in this account: the jihadi groups, the military intelligence ISI, with its tentacles in everything from nuclear policy to domestic politics: the disappearances and killings in Baluchistan. When Lieven describes Pakistan as less dangerous to live in and report from than people think that may be because he does not write about the areas of most sensitivity to the intelligence services.

The Arab world might be dominating the headlines but that shouldn't take away from the importance of this book, which comes out at a time when US-Pakistan relations are at their lowest point since 9/11. In many ways, this book feels like a 560-page long application for an advisor to the Obama administration on how to turn around relations with Islamabad. Whether or not they employ Lieven, they should read his book.

services — from getting a job to a phone connection, it's all about who you know. As Lieven says, the same people are always in government whether it's a military or civilian regime. In fact, he argues that some of Pakistan's generals have done more towards reform than the political leaders and that some civilian regimes have been more dictatorial than the military.

In his view the only institution with any meritocracy is the army. Last month I was in army headquarters when they were holding the annual promotions board for brigadiers and colonels — a rigorous process of reports and where all the generals must agree. I couldn't help thinking of the contrast with Pakistan's political parties, which are personal fiefdoms with no internal elections. Yet as the real power in the land, surely it

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