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# A COUNTRY THAT STILL SOMEHOW FUNCTIONS

## PAKISTAN: A HARD COUNTRY

by Anatol Lieven  
(Allen Lane, £30)

ALEX VON TUNZELMANN

On August 19, 2008, Anatol Lieven, professor of international relations and terrorism studies at King's College London, visited a grim, damp, concrete police station house in Peshawar, in what was then known as the North-West Frontier Province, Pakistan. He met the sub-inspector, "a big, very tough-looking middle-aged man with enormous fists – not a good person to be interrogated by".

The day before, Pervez Musharraf had resigned from the presidency of Pakistan. Lieven asked the sub-inspector if he would stop using torture now that the nation was again technically a democracy. "If I had turned into a purple elephant his look could not have been more blank with amazement," admits Lieven. "I had asked not just a meaningless question, but one with no connection whatsoever to any reality he knew."

Like many other anecdotes in Lieven's comprehensive survey of modern Pakistan, this story is at once dryly amusing, depressing and enlightening. The gulf between the reality the sub-inspector knows – indeed, the multiple realities most Pakistanis know – and how outsiders

perceive their country is wide and deep. Lieven's book is an ambitious and much-needed attempt to bridge it.

The most striking thing about the book is its informed and consistently sensible tone. This tone is not heard much in discussions about Pakistan, and it is refreshing. Lieven writes in an affable, conversational voice, but not a casual one. His observations are precise and judicious. He avoids what he calls the "dangerous intellectual mess" created by confusing terms such as extremism and militancy with the separate concepts of fundamentalism and conservatism.

He maintains his sensible tone when it comes to what is now rather generically referred to as Islamism. Pakistan, he says, is full of diverse religious traditions that are unlikely to unite except in the face of an American ground invasion – an eventuality against which he makes strong and repeated pleas. Short of that, he argues, the greatest internal threat to the Pakistani state is not Islamism; it is water security.

"Over the next century, the possible long-term combination of climate change, acute water shortages, poor water infrastructure and steep population growth has the potential to wreck Pakistan as an organised state and society," he writes. "Human beings can survive for centuries without democracy, and even without much security. They cannot live for more than three days without water."

What emerges from Lieven's survey is a complex and fascinating country, its strong social structure (in contrast to its weak state structures) woven tightly between twin supports of kinship and patronage. The book is

also something of a personal travelogue. Lieven is alarmed to find himself chatting to a Taliban supporter amid Soviet home decor in the Mohmand Agency, investigates a horrific allegation of girls being buried alive in Balochistan, hunts boar with the Bhuttos in interior Sindh, and contemplates the singular sexual politics of Punjabis. Walking through the beautiful public gardens of Jinnah Bagh in Lahore, on his way from breakfast in a stylish café to a modern art gallery, he observes middle-class couples strolling and girls in brightly coloured shalwar kameezes playing ball games: "I reflected on the idiocy of portraying Pakistan as a 'failed state'. It was hardly a scene reminiscent of Grozny or Mogadishu." He does, of course, acknowledge that Lahore and Peshawar may as well be in different countries.

This book is measured, insightful and extremely useful for anyone who hopes to understand more about this much-misunderstood country. As Lieven points out, the West, China

and India all have vital strategic interests in Pakistan. While he never underplays the dangers therein, this is ultimately a corrective and



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humanising portrait of a country which, while it may appear to be dysfunctional on an operatic scale, does somehow function. One short section (in the chapter about Justice) is entitled Not Quite as Bad as it Looks. If Professor Lieven were a less serious scholar, that might even have served as an alternative subtitle for his book.

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**Departing ruler:**  
General Pervez  
Musharraf, who  
stepped down as  
president of  
Pakistan in  
2008,  
surrounded by  
personal guards  
at his office