

Reviews

The future for Pakistan

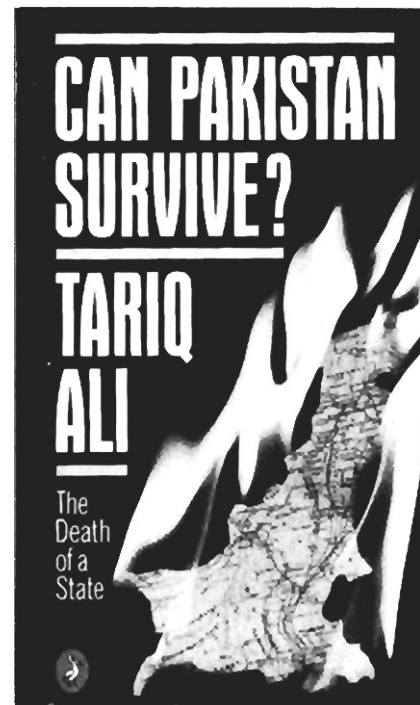
Brendan O'Leary

Tariq Ali: Can Pakistan Survive? Penguin Books, 1983, £2.95.

'Can Pakistan Survive?' receives the answer that the demise of Tariq Ali's home state is a 'consummation devoutly to be wished'. Ali tells us why Pakistan ought not to exist. Born amidst the slaughter of independence and partition, the scarcely desired child of the imperialist-influenced Muslim League of Jinnah and the errors of Indian nationalists and communists, Pakistan's existence seemed to deny reason in history. East and West were divided by 1,000 miles of Indian territory and, until the establishment of Bangladesh, (after a quasi-genocidal repression of the Bengalis was stopped by a much needed, if self-interested, Indian invasion) the West pillaged the East in a manner worthy of their British predecessors. Not the West, of course, but rather the dominant class of the Punjab, the bureaucratic-military-landed power elite that Ali demonstrates to be one of the most philistine and unashamed blocs of parasites ever to preside over a state. Pakistan even after the secession of Bangladesh did not possess linguistic, ethnic or territorial unity; only the legacies of the British Raj and the use and abuse of Islam gave the state coherence.

In a brisk well written narrative Ali takes the reader through the origins of Pakistan, the first decade of independence, the military dictatorships of Ayub and Yahya, the civil war, Bhutto's populist debacle (1971-77), and finally the military fist in an Islamic glove personified in the comic but awful General Zia-ul-Haq. Perhaps the weakest section of the book is here, because, unlike elsewhere, a lot is presumed of the reader. Ali writes with the vision of a South Asian internationalist inspired by the best sort of Trotskyist world view. The vacillations and twists of the Maoists and Stalinists in Pakistan (and India), who have ended up critically supporting their own exits from the political stage in virtuoso performances only matched by the dangerous stupidity of Pakistan's generals, are well documented.

Ali's final chapter on Pakistan's geo-



political position is a useful overview of recent developments in Central and South Asia. And yet it is not clear that Ali's picture of Pakistan in perpetual crisis, within sight of being deleted from the map, is tenable. The USA and India both 'need' Pakistan. That 'backward, nomadic Baluchistan, should have produced a dedicated and internationalist cadre without equal in contemporary Pakistan' (p195) is, perhaps, an index for despair rather than hope. Ali holds to his trenchant optimism, to his vision which is an entirely worthy one: a voluntary federation of South Asian Republics. This is the tone of the undefeated revolutionary, the militant refusal to accept the accomplished fact. Yet, I am left with a more sombre view: 'could it be that History has something still worse in store? ... will the antediluvian generals of South Asia, bedecked with former imperialist medals, try to beat each other to the nuclear draw?' (p 193)

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unemployment, peace, democratic rights, anti-racism and women's liberation, the encouragement of links and alliances between these struggles and movements in a non-opportunist manner, and the application of Marxist analysis and organisation to these struggles, along with the stimulation of extensive Marxist discussion and debate.' (p338).

Apart from the omission of any mention of struggles around the control and organisation of the economy (presumably to avoid the remotest possibility the author may fall into the trap of economism) this ritual incantation is notable only for its vacuous timelessness. It could have come straight out of the 1977 edition of the *British Road to Socialism*: so much for the radical impression of Thatcherism on all aspects of political life!

What is, above all, notable about the book's strategic conclusions are their lack of radicalism in relation to the depth of the tasks implied by its analysis: 'A protracted, and arduous task lies before the entire left in swinging the people away from Thatcherism and onto a road of democratic peaceful advance. It can be achieved, provided the left blends its socialist vision with realistic estimates of the present situation and there is the utmost unity and co-operation among all the progressive forces and movements' (p339) is how Bloomfield concludes his article; hardly a high note on which to end such a book. Hall and Jacques in the introduction similarly conclude that what is required is, first, the 'transformation of the labour movement' (p16) by which they appear to mean 'a major political, social, cultural, ideological renewal' (p14), and second, 'the construction by the labour movement of the broadest possible set of alliances against Thatcherism involving, in the initial instance, possibly quite modest objectives' (p16). Hardly the kind of clear and confident line of advance that is likely to convince waverers that *there is* an alternative as Thatcher embarks on her second term of office.

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