

Book Review: Political Administrators: The Story of the Civil Service of Pakistan

by Blog Admin

February 28, 2013

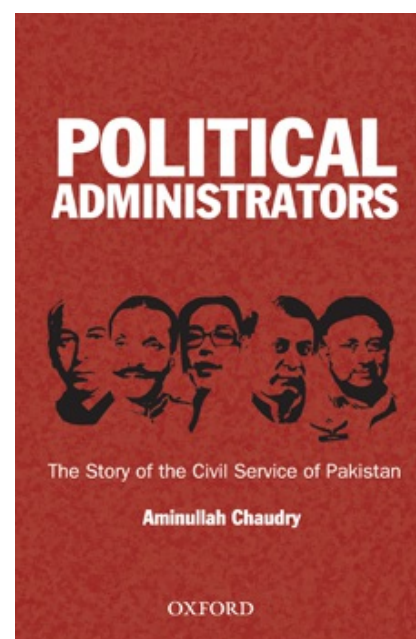
*Much analysis of Pakistan's government and civil service has been undertaken by political analysts and academicians, but rarely by an individual from within. As and when civil servants have written, they have made an unsuccessful attempt to emphasize their neutrality, quoting instances of how they resisted political pressure, argues **Aminullah Chaudry**. In **Political Administrators**, Chaudry shares personal experiences of his time as a civil servant, seeking to question existing literature on the topic. **Elisabetta Iob** finds that a lack of primary sources damages the book as a historical academic source.*

Political Administrators: The Story of the Civil Service of Pakistan.
Aminullah Chaudry. Oxford University Press. 2011

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The life of [Aminullah Chaudry](#) – the author of *Political Administrators: The Story of the Civil Service of Pakistan* - is not that of a footnote in Pakistan's history. Karachi Airport, 12th October 1999, 19:47. An army official in full dress is performing a curious rite on the runway. His close entourage has just forced the officers of the local control tower to eat their orders and allow the PK-895 airbus to land on Pakistani soil. As soon as the high-rank official gets off the aircraft, he hands a flag over to someone who appears to be a Sergeant. On his way to his trunk, the Sergeant is, in turn, approached by a superior. After exchanging a few words, they start waving the flag of the Pakistan army quite vigorously. "He has taken over. He has not signed the surrender", thought all those present. The high-rank army official in full dress is the just-dismissed Chief of Army Staff Gen. Pervez Musharraf, and the unusual flag ceremony seals the fourth military coup of Pakistan's troubled political history. Finally, after months of tensions, the face-off between the Government led by Nawaz Sharif and the army is reaching its zenith. The Sharif family will soon be arrested and, together with an advisor to the Prime Minister, the Principal Secretary, Pakistan International Airlines Chairman, Ehtesab Bureau Chief, Inspector General Police, Sindh and the Director General of the Civil Aviation Authority, Pakistan, tried on hijacking charges in a controversial case before an Anti-Terrorism Court.

The name of the Director General of the Civil Aviation Authority, Pakistan is Aminullah Chaudry, and the book under scrutiny here is part of his process of remembering and digesting events. "In jail, my minder repeatedly asked me why I, and other civil servants, would not take a 'stand' against orders emanating from what he referred in contemptuous tones as 'bloody politicians' [...] the utterances of this rather naive and artless officer set me thinking about the role of civil servants in general and of my parent cadre, the Civil Service of Pakistan." (p. xvii-xviii) *Political Administrators* is, oddly enough, a story about dreams and illusions, and love and loss. An autobiography tinted with the nuances of the politico-historical treatise, it progressively shapes up as a clear and, at times, pitiless first-hand account of the initial, transitional establishment and the subsequent development of the Pakistan Civil Service. Chaudry's own quest for 'truth' merges here with a socio-cultural and political analysis of the subtle workings that operate within the local bureaucracy, and flirtatiously interweaves with the milestones of the history of Pakistan as a State. The narrative tissue crafts a curious play of associations and contrasts. The documentary-supported grim







reality persistently challenges author's dreams and expectations, putting on display both low- and high-rank civil servants' obsessions, resilience to almost all attempts at reforming the administrative apparatus, perceptions (or fantasies) of palace conspiracies and "registry office" complexes. In turn, bureaucratic cadres' deficiencies and abuses either impact on or reflect the weaknesses of the Pakistani State through a vicious circle of *liaisons dangereuses*.

As he unfolds the early stages of his career (Part I and II), Aminullah Chaudry reveals the true character of his relationship with his research subject. Indeed, events, anecdotes and personalities stage here a three-act melodrama that goes through the bundle of the stereotypical communication of the falling in love. First, the author *talks about* his sui generis beloved – the "consuming ambition" (p. 3) to secure a permanent appointment within the Pakistani administrative machinery – by outlining with a wealth of details the history of the Indian Civil Service and the early years of the Pakistan Civil Service. Author's admission to the Civil Service Academy marks then a new chapter in his life. "It was" – Chaudry recalls – "an excited, keyed up and somewhat nervous which assembled in the Civil Service Academy, Lahore on the morning of 16th October 1967". (p. 61) Admission secured, the time has now come for him to *talk to* the protagonists who can make his dreams come true, namely teachers, civil servants and fellow students within the Academy. Nevertheless, low-quality teaching, patronage dynamics and nepotism taking the lion's share in all assessment/appointment activities, the initial enthusiasm and idealism unquestionably could not help but fizzle out. Finally, Chaudry's climbing of the administrative career's ladder epitomises the *talking-with* phase. His postings to the so-called Sub-divisions and at district-, division-, provincial and federal-levels re-chart the geography of those endless processes of negotiation of power and limited resource that embroil civil servants, institutions and citizens in both urban and rural Punjab.

The argumentative pattern of *Political Administrators* is heavily flawed by a methodological oversight. Indeed, the total lack of those, albeit rather scattered, local primary sources that are nowadays available in Pakistani district, provincial and federal archives leaves a nasty taste in any historian's mouth. Their careful analysis would have certainly enriched the whole study with new and relevant information, data and details. Still, the book adds an interesting contribution to the existing, growing literature that focuses on the everyday experience of State institutions in post-colonial societies. Indeed, by lifting the curtain on the duplicities of the Pakistani bureaucracy, its power struggles and its grassroots, perilous interdependence with politics, it unquestionably undermines that monolithic reputation of the local Civil Service as a neutral, independent and highly powerful institution that has inspired scholarly analysis so far.

A truthful yet, at times, too emotional first-hand account of the Pakistani bureaucracy and its "secrets", the book is a particular boon to all those interested in Pakistan's institutional and political history and in the processes of elaboration of an everyday State and citizenship.

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