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Book Review

Irfan Ahmad, *Islam and Democracy in India: The Transformation of Jamaat-e-Islami*. Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford; Footprint Books, Warriewood, NSW, 2009, pp. 328, ISBN 978-0-69113-920-3 (Pbk).

While the topic of this book may seem a little remote to us in Australia, it is important to remember that India is home to the second largest number of Muslims in the world after Indonesia (some would take issue with the author and assert it comes third after Pakistan) and that it has survived as an assertively secular state since 1947. In addition it is able to accommodate diverse minority faiths and, to date, not succumb to the rabid Hindu sectarianism displayed by the Hindutva groups since the 1980s, principally directing their venom against the 13% Muslim minority in India as well as neighbouring Pakistan. The book is particularly topical at a time when Islamists have done well in recent elections in Tunisia and Egypt as well as other parts of the Arab world, as it forms a vital contribution to the wider debate on whether or not Islam is compatible with secularism and democracy.

Although the focus is on India and developments there in light of growing support for a revived Islamism in the subcontinent, as well as the reaction to the Hindutva movement in India itself, Ahmad's central argument is that the Jamaat-e-Islami, which began as a radical movement, has now become more tolerant of alternative perspectives. This is a process now being mirrored in other parts of the world, challenging the argument of those who refer to a 'clash of civilisations' and who believe that Islam and democracy are incompatible.[1]

The author, Irfan Ahmad, assistant professor of politics in the School of Political and Social Inquiry at Monash, has focused his research on the Jamaat-e-Islami, the most influential Islamist organization in India, because although its founder, Syed Abul Ala Maududi (1903–79), was a vocal critic of democracy and the nation state, including the creation of Pakistan, this key Muslim movement has now moved away to work within the framework of secular democracy. Ahmad's research was based on fieldwork conducted in North India between 2001 and 2004, particularly around Aligarh, seat of the Aligarh Muslim University founded in 1875, despite considerable difficulty in gaining the trust of some of the individuals he sought to interview.

As Ahmad points out, it was unusual to develop research on Islam in the context of India as so many people think of it as 'Hindu raj' and forget how many Muslims live there, even as a minority. However, his research is important because of the way he traces the politics of Islam in responding to being part of a democratic secular society and because of his analysis of the process of radicalisation of SIMI, the Student Islamic Movement of India, founded in 1976 as a young breakaway group from the Jamaat.

The heart of the book lies in the way in which the author traces the evolution of the Jamaat from its foundation by Maududi in 1941 to the position it had reached at the time of research, despite the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Hindutva movement, which was then in power, following their campaign to rebuild the Babri

1. Some of these, like Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington, are listed on p. 11.

mosque at Ayodhya as a temple to Lord Ram after they destroyed the original building in 1992. Maududi, who originally opposed the creation of both India and Pakistan, eventually moved to Pakistan in 1951, but his followers continued to argue that Muslims in India were unable to work for this secular state which they regarded as *dar al-kufr* or *dar al-harb* and believed that ultimately they were working to restore the concept of the caliphate, which had originally been abolished in 1924. For many converts to his way of thinking, this involved giving up their jobs and avoiding a range of activities from voting in elections to listening to music, as well as being unable to attend schools or colleges, which Maududi had denounced as slaughterhouses.

Not surprisingly, most Muslims in India were used to living in a secular state (including Muslim leaders like Gandhi's colleague in the independence movement, Abulkalam Azad), and many saw participation in elections and supporting their own candidates as a way of protecting their minority status. Ahmad argues that this realisation was one of the key factors in persuading the Jamaat to change its line on participation in elections, although he acknowledges that the process involved many internal conflicts. Part of the fascination of his research is the account of interviews with individuals who had moved through very diverse Islamic groups as they sought to reconcile their faith with the teachings of the prophet and Maududi himself, while considering the reality of the Indian state and the aspirations of the vast majority of Muslims for a better life that involved education and employment in the existing system. The Jamaat had changed even before the rise to power of the BJP in the 1980s, but the narrow sectarianism of the Hindutva movement did produce the movement's radical offspring, the SIMI, and Ahmad refers to a parallel process in countries like Algeria and Egypt, when Islamists turn radical 'because the states denied them participation in the political process' (p. 227).

The implications of the author's thesis are crucial in supporting those of us who argue that there is nothing incompatible with the idea of Muslims accepting secular democracy as well as taking part in elections. It is only when democracy becomes exclusive that Muslims turn radical. In this context, despite the unusual focus on India, this is a crucially important book for scholars and laypeople wishing to learn more about how a resurgent Islam has no difficulty in being part of a democratic, pluralist society.

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