Article | Surveillance, Authoritarianism and 'Imperial Effects' in Pakistan

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Abstract

To speak of 'Surveillance and the Global Turn to Authoritarianism' presupposes a moment with little connection to that which has gone before, or places outside of North America and Europe. While Trump and Brexit inaugurate a consequential shift, even rupture, in the political terrain, we must not lose sight of places and peoples where American Wars—with European support—were waged in the decades preceding this 'global turn', nor the fate of these places today. We argue that the sustained transfer of sophisticated surveillance technologies, as part and parcel of both direct military assault and more expansive support for security states, has had lasting imperial effects outside imperial centres that reverberate today. We take our point of departure in Pakistan—the site of hundreds of drone bombardments under Obama, one of the top recipients of US military aid, and the largest known recipient of funding from the National Security Agency (NSA)—to argue that 'global turns' must not forget the rest of the world, and Surveillance Studies may have far to go before it fully addresses its Eurocentrism.

Introduction

We begin with some background on Pakistan.

First, in the post-9/11 period, around 60,000 Pakistanis have been violently killed in insurgency attacks and counterinsurgency operations. The government often cites this number to bring attention to the cost in lives paid by Pakistan in the 'War on Terror'.

Secondly, half of those who have been killed have not been killed by militants. They have been killed by the Pakistani security state with the help of the American military: about 10 per cent, or 3,000, have been killed by American drones.[1] Militancy remains a key source of violence within Pakistan, but it is certainly not the only one.

Finally, the growth of the Pakistani security state and its surveillance capacity is closely entangled with the historical intervention of the United States, the support of its allies, and their geopolitical interests in the

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[1] This is based on numbers from the Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies (PIPS), and on numbers from the Bureau of Investigative Journalism. These numbers are neither fully reliable nor do they give a full picture, but they are indicative of the layout of violence in Pakistan. We would like to thank Arif Naveed of the University of Cambridge for providing the numbers from PIPS.

region. The investment of USD 46 billion to build a corridor linking the southwestern Chinese province of Xinjiang to the Indian Ocean via Pakistan means that the gauntlet of foreign intervention will now be passed, albeit reluctantly, to China.

Trump and Brexit may mark a consequential shift, even rupture, in the political terrain, but the facts above remind us that they were preceded by a decade-and-a-half long war that has marked places like Pakistan– or, for that matter, Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq, and Libya. The intensity and distribution of these markings— or 'imperial effects'—are not unitary across time and space and have yet to be fully unpacked. Yet, the breadth and depth of historical and sustained intervention by the US and its allies can easily be established in places like Pakistan. Here, direct military assaults through American drones have left 3,000 dead. American support for the Pakistan Army has been closely entangled with collusion to carry out military raids and operations within the borders of Pakistan, on Pakistanis. And, the sustained transfer of military technologies—among them sophisticated surveillance technologies—has led to a ballooning of the capacity of the security state. Without denying the agency of Pakistan or Pakistanis—a topic for another paper—we call for attention to these 'imperial effects'. They indicate that debates on the 'global turn to authoritarianism' misses a crucial part of the story: that 'technologies of authoritarianism' have been actively nurtured in other places around the world by the very governments which are now witnessing a 'global turn'. In fact, the 'global turn' is a sign that the War on Terror is coming home.

Imperial Effects: Surveillance and Security in Pakistan

Since Pakistan's independence in 1947, the Pakistani security state, through the Pakistan Army, has held power three times through coups. Every coup has enjoyed military and economic aid from the United States—a luxury not available to elected governments who witnessed a tapering off, if not total shut down, of aid after transition to democratic rule.[2] It was not until 2008, with the toppling of the third military regime, that this pattern in US aid shifted. Total aid from 1947 until today totals more than USD 80 billion, and in the period between 2002 and 2009 military aid constituted at least 70 per cent of US assistance.[3] It was only when an Enhanced Partnership Act for Pakistan (popularly known as the Kerry-Lugar Bill) was passed, that this number decreased slightly to around 60 per cent (Center for Global Development 2014).

In the post-9/11 period, the transfer of sophisticated surveillance technologies have constituted an important part of this support. Traces of this transfer can be found in pieces of evidence reported by journalists and advocacy groups. From them, we know that Pakistan is the largest known recipient of NSA funds, receiving twice as much as the second-largest grantee, Jordan (Privacy International 2017). Pakistan is also an approved Third Party Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) partner.[4] This means Pakistan enjoys access to 'advanced techniques' if its state officials are 'willing to do something politically risky'.[5] It seems that this partnership results in Pakistan providing 'unique access, regional analytical expertise, foreign language capabilities and/or I&W [Intelligence & Warning] support' in return for 'technical solutions (e.g. hardware, software) and/or access to related technology'.[6] Pakistan has also cooperated with a slew of foreign companies like Alcatel (France), Atis (Germany), Ericsson (Sweden) and Huawei (China) to gain access to

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[2] In some democratic eras, e.g. in the 1990s, American aid was reduced to zero according to numbers provided by The Guardian (2010).

[3] See The Guardian (2010).

[4] See Privacy International (2017).

[5] See Privacy International (2017).

[6] This information is from the 2009 document entitled, 'What are We After With Our Third Party Relationships?— And What Do They Want From Us, Generally Speaking?' which consists of an interview with the Deputy Assistant for SIGINT Operations in the NSA's Foreign Affairs Directorate (see Greenwald 2009).

interception technology for the purposes of surveillance. This includes the acquisition of an International Mobile Subscriber Identity or IMSI-catcher through a 'temporary licence' from the UK.[7]

Just like military aid, the transfer of surveillance technologies has been closely entwined with the security agendas of American and European governments, and their allies. The complete details of this entanglement are hard to come by, but a 2009 cable from the US Embassy in Islamabad discovered by WikiLeaks reveals that it was extensive.[8] The cable exposes that Pakistan and the US sought deeper cooperation around surveillance of Pakistanis as part of a *quid pro quo*. In return for cooperation agreements and surveillance technology transfers, the Government of Pakistan promised to send extensive information on its citizens from its National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA) as well as lists of Advanced Passenger Information (API) and Passenger Name Records (PNRs) from flights leaving Pakistan. The enhancements sought by the Pakistanis included 'adding voice and facial recognition capability' and the installation of 'a pilot biometric system at the Chaman border crossing [on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border], where 30,000 to 35,000 people cross each day'. These systems have since been extended. In an interview with a Pakistani politician,[9] Julian Assange revealed that 'a front company was set up in the United Kingdom—International Identity Services, which was hired as the consultants for NADRA to squirrel out the NADRA data for all of Pakistan' (News Desk 2017). Ironically, the Pakistan People's Party or PPP, whose government were in negotiations with the Americans about transferred surveillance technologies, later discovered that they were themselves being surveilled by the United States (see Haider 2014).

The recent shift of Pakistan into the orbit of Chinese influence marks the expansion of this surveillance and security state. We know that the plan for the China Pakistan Economic Corridor, or CPEC, will include the development of a 'full system of monitoring and surveillance in cities from Peshawar to Karachi, with 24 hour video recordings on roads and busy marketplaces for law and order'.[10] New fibreoptic cables will both secure 'cultural transmission [...] for the dissemination of Chinese culture in Pakistan'—opening up Pakistan as a new potential market, and securing Chinese capital investment.[11] Much work remains to be done on China's 'imperial presence' in Pakistan, as well as on the intensity, extent, and form of this expansion.

The evidence presented above is neither fully elaborated, nor does it show a complete picture of what is going on in Pakistan. However, this focus on the transfer of surveillance technology as part of a nexus of support for the security state in Pakistan alerts us to the danger of speaking of a 'global turn to authoritarianism' marked primarily by Trump and Brexit. There is certainly a Western jerk to the far right that is being solidified with new leaders and new laws, but it has been both preceded and foreshadowed by the rapid expansion of and Western support for 'technologies of authoritarianism' in countries like Pakistan.

We are not saying that all transfers of surveillance technologies are pernicious—in fact, they have also been used to eradicate polio[12] or fight epidemics[13] in Pakistan. However, the sustained and long-term transfer of surveillance technologies, much of which is part and parcel of a more expansive support of the security state, has been deeply entangled with the national security priorities of North America and Europe—especially the United States. It has also fed into the security interests of the Pakistani state.

Therefore, one of the results of transferred surveillance technologies has been a rapid expansion of the capacity of the security state. This security state does not apply surveillance technologies equally. Instead,

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[7] The IMSI-catcher is a telephone eavesdropping-device that intercepts mobile phone traffic and tracks location data of cellular phone users (see Cox 2017).
[8] US Embassy (2009).
[9] The cricketer-turned-politician, Imran Khan.
[10] See Husain (2017).
[11] See Husain (2017).
[12] See Polio Global Eradication Initiative (2017).
[13] See British High Commission Islamabad (2017).

as Deepa Kumar (in Kundnani and Kumar 2014) argues, surveillance tends to target marginalised, racialised, and dissident peoples and communities: such communities are more likely to be surveilled, arbitrarily arrested, deported, physically and mentally harassed, put into solitary confinement, sentenced for crimes, and suspected for their social relations and interactions (see Kundnani and Kumar 2014).

Take the example of Pakistan's ethnic Pashtun population: when a string of bombings by militants earlier this year left over a hundred people dead, Pashtuns from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas or FATA were the first to be targeted. FATA is a small sliver of territory bordering Afghanistan and has been a site of drone bombings, army operations, and militant attacks in the post-9/11 period, forcing its residents to flee. Seventy-three per cent of its residents live in Multi-Dimensional Poverty, and it has long been seen through the racialised lens of first the colonial and now the Pakistani state, with Churchill once calling them 'savages and barbarous' (Churchill 1897). In the capital of Islamabad and its twin city of Rawalpindi alone 5,400 Pashtuns from FATA were placed under strict surveillance as the government considered 'issuing them chip-based national identity cards equipped with security features' in the immediate aftermath of attacks earlier this year (see Asghar 2017). This sort of surveillance has aided mass killing of Pashtuns: of the 30,000 killed by the Pakistani and American states since 9/11, half of them have been killed in FATA, a Pashtun-majority territory.[14] Other minorities—like Pakistan's minority Baloch population—have faced similar levels of surveillance and harassment: particularly, members of its separatist uprising have been subject to disappearances, torture, kill-and-dumps, encounter killings and army operations.[15] Tracking of political activists through mobile phone surveillance and informant networks has played a key role in army atrocities.[16]

Or, take the example of Pakistani political organisers, activists, dissidents. Pakistan's premier intelligence agency, the Inter Services Intelligence or ISI, has been given legal cover by the government to take action against those involved in 'online crime'—effectively defined as those taking critical stances vis-a-vis the state—through a new act passed called the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act, a law several online campaigners have criticised for its potential to shrink online spaces of debate and dissent.[17] Social media surveillance of critics of state policies has resulted in a targeting of groups through infiltration, content monitoring, and interception, and has resulted in enforced disappearances, torture, arrests, interrogations and confiscation of digital devices of those summoned by authorities.[18] More indirect methods to censor dissent have also been taken into use: Pakistan has banned YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and websites run by religious, ethnic and sexual minorities in part through the use of surveillance technologies that allow them to uncover the details of administrators and moderators.[19] Through this regulation of online spaces, it has allowed some groups—for instance pro-army propagandists or far-right Islamist extremists active on social media—to enjoy more space than others, effectively allowing the former to violently challenge journalists, political workers, dissidents, and others from rivalling factions (Mehmood 2017).

North American and European governments are certainly not engineering much of what is going on, but post-9/11 intervention by these governments in Pakistan has further expanded the *capacity* of the security state to carry out such targeting. In fact, Privacy International opens a 2015 report on Pakistan by noting that the ballooning of both the military's defence budget and its access to sophisticated surveillance technologies is a 'result of significant levels of international assistance' (Privacy International 2017). We

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[14] This is based on numbers from the Government of Pakistan, and on numbers from the Bureau of Investigative Journalism. These numbers are neither fully reliable nor do they give a full picture, but they are indicative of the layout of violence in Pakistan.

[15] See e.g. Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (2014); Human Rights Watch (2011).

[16] This is based on several years of reporting and 10 months of recent fieldwork around the southern province of Balochistan carried out by one of the authors, Mahvish Ahmad.

[17] See e.g. Bytes For All (2017) and Bytes For All (2015).

[18] See e.g. the case of Pakistan's disappeared bloggers earlier this year (Hashim 2016).

[19] For more information, see Dawn (2017).

argue that this expansion has engendered the conditions within which such extensive targeting is possible, to the detriment of marginalised, racialised, and dissident peoples and communities in Pakistan.

The Importance of an 'Imperial Turn'

Despite the extensive entanglements of the security and surveillance state with both colonial pasts and imperial presents outside imperial centers, and the concomitant ballooning of the surveillance and security state, we have almost no understanding of places like Pakistan. Above, we have given something akin to a laundry list of factors that indicate the importance of studying Pakistan. However, a laundry list is not the same as understanding a place. At best, the little research that exists assumes that the security and surveillance state is a bad carbon copy of its counterparts in the West. As a result, important sites of inquiry remain unaddressed, most importantly the 'foreign policy' and 'foreign transfers' of surveillance technologies in spreading 'technologies of authoritarianism' far beyond the borders of North America and Europe.

To unpack how we can develop a more nuanced take on the place of transferred surveillance and security technologies in the ballooning of 'technologies of authoritarianism', we turn to Ann Stoler (2013, 2016). In her recent book, *Imperial Duress*, Stoler (2016: 4) argues that we must be careful in drawing out the 'connectivities joining colonial pasts to "postcolonial" presents' and instead tease out the 'less obvious ways' that 'colonial constraints and imperial dispositions have tenacious presence[s]'. She argues, instead, of the importance of paying attention to 'what people are "left with": to what remains, to the aftershocks of empire, to the material and social afterlife of structures, sensibilities, and things' (2013: 9). Where she pays attention to the *longue dureé*—the *temporal* trajectories—through which 'more protracted imperial processes that saturate the subsoil of people's lives and persist, sometimes subjacently'—we argue for the importance of tracing imperial effects along contemporaneous, *spatial* trajectories. Like scholars who have mentioned events from distant colonial pasts and assumed that they reverberate through to the present merely through their mention, we argue that analyses of surveillance, security and the state in North America and Europe cannot fully account for how they operate in other places, further afield in, say, Pakistan. In fact, such an approach re-inscribes the centrality of North America and Europe not just in its turning away from the rest of the world, but its assumption that we can understand the state of security and surveillance in places like Pakistan because we understand them in the United States. In fact, it is precisely the lack of attention paid to places like Pakistan that has resulted in us making claims about such things as 'global turns to authoritarianism': the lives and memories of several hundreds and thousands of people killed in the run-up to recent elections and referendums in the West bears no importance, no weight, in the debates that take place today.

Of course, this is not akin to saying that empire has never been addressed within the field of Surveillance Studies. McCoy's (2009) *Policing America's Empire: The United States, the Philippines, and the Rise of the Surveillance State* explores how the American colonial regime developed sophisticated police and intelligence units that eventually returned, to be applied, on the lives of marginalised, racialised and dissident populations in the United States. Likewise, scholars like Arun Kundnani and Deepa Kumar (2014) have long argued for the importance of paying attention to how race and empire have been co-constitutive of the surveillance state, such as in this quote by Kundnani:

> There is a constant flow in the history of the national security state between sites of colonial and neo-colonial conquest and sites of oppression within the United States. So we continuously see initiatives, and practices, and ideologies of surveillance that have emerged in the context of overseas empire coming back home to be used against radical movements in the United States, and visa versa.

Despite the excellent work that these, and other scholars,[20] have carried out, however, North America and Europe remain central to most analyses of surveillance and security. While these scholars have effectively unpacked how surveillance is not 'undifferentiated and universal' (Gürses, Kundnani and Van Hoboken 2016: 578-579) but rather mediated by prisms of race in the West, the same work has not been done to understand how surveillance and security transferred from the West to the rest of the world has fared. In other words, it has been more important to understand how imperial surveillance and security experiments have been 'brought back' to the West to be applied on marginalised, racialised and dissident populations 'at home', than see what they have 'left behind' in the countries where the experimentation first took place. This is not to say that empire has not been understood as an important corollary to racialised governance— McCoy's book and Kundnani's quote above clearly make this argument—but it is to argue that the place of empire has not been fully unpacked. Despite the centrality of a country like Pakistan to the security agenda of the United States in the post-9/11 era, its position as the largest known recipient of NSA funding, and long-standing national security entanglements that have led to an expansion of the Pakistani security state into one of the largest in the world, there is almost no research into the place of surveillance in Pakistani state or society.[21]

While we agree that security surveillance technologies travel between racialised populations 'at home' and empire 'abroad' we insist that we need more work to understand the 'abroad' part of this equation. In fact, attention to Pakistan throws up a host of new questions. These include, but are not limited to: how does the transference of surveillance technologies and the resultant explosion of the capacity of the security state to oversee its population shape and leave behind effects? How does the presence of not one, but multiple states, having access to the data of Pakistani citizens challenge our assumptions of the 'on-looker'—and what do these multiple 'on-lookers' mean for organised political resistance in Pakistan against the 'technologies of authoritarianism' that surveillance and security technologies help entrench and expand? What does it mean when sophisticated surveillance technology transfers from abroad combine with formal and informal networks of *mukhbirs*, the Urdu word for collaborators or informers, and how does this fundamentally change surveillance at its point of effect? How are technologies of surveillance 'left behind' through foreign intervention used to police and regulate public spaces both offline and online, and how does it interact with policies around censorship in Pakistan? How do these surveillance technologies shape public space online and offline? How do they interact with conversations around free speech, rights, justice, racial profiling, torture, abductions, and other violence against marginalised communities in Pakistan?

One of the more disconcerting consequences of this lacunae is the inadvertent assumption that the sort of political language suited for countering surveillance 'at home'—a key part of our current political fight against authoritarianism—does not need to be re-adjusted when alliances are sought with surveilled, marginalised, racialised, and dissident populations abroad. In fact, in Pakistan, we face other challenges when it comes to political organising around the question of surveillance and authoritarianism, and they require us to ask different questions. For example: what does it mean to speak of 'privacy' in a place like Pakistan, where the individualised subject of Western liberal democracies does not exist, at least not in the same way? In a country where 'race' does not exist as a word in Urdu or any other spoken language in Pakistan, what does it mean to speak of racialised communities? What is the place of law and technical solutions like legal reform and encryption to questions of surveillance when most of those who are on the receiving end of the surveillance and security state have some of the lowest literacy rates in the world—and little to no access to courts? What is the place of such legal-technical fixes for some of Pakistan's most vulnerable and targeted communities when they do not have the means to afford devices or equipment that can offer sophisticated digital cover? And, how do we make sense of the overlapping forms of

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[20] See Simone Browne (2015), Dubrofsky and Magnet (2015), Mirzoeff (2011), Gürses, Kundnani, and Van Hoboken (2016).
[21] A notable exception is Madiha Tahir and Sanaa Alimia's work on security and surveillance of Pashtuns (see Tahir 2017; Alimia 2015). Also see Maqsood (2016).

surveillance—not just from the state, but criminal groups, Islamists, militants, political groups, families—that bleed into one another?

If we do not attend to such questions, the unstated assumption, or unintended conclusion, that one can draw is that the place of surveillance in places like Pakistan is merely a shadow, or bad copy, of what is going on in Europe and North America, and that the political language of both counter-surveillance and anti-authoritarianism can unproblematically be used in undifferentiated ways across the world. Our experience, in journalism, activism, and political organising within Pakistan, indicates that this is certainly not the case. Both of us—and many of our Pashtun, Baloch, dissident, journalist, writer, activist, organiser friends—have been subject to surveillance and harassment by, among other, the security state. Such stories must be taken seriously, rather than assumed to be similar to, or bad copies of, the experiences of targeted communities in the West. We find ourselves bereft of an internationalist political language that is used widely enough to communicate what it is that we have experienced, and what political battles we face. Neither the liberal language of rights, nor the left-wing language of western anti-imperialism, fully accommodates the political battles against an over-extended surveillance security state and society that has been implicit in the explosion of state and militant violence that we face in Pakistan. And, it certainly provides us with no internationalist languages that address the entrance of China into Pakistani politics.

This is a call for an extension of Surveillance Studies to speak in more detail and with more reflection about the rest of the world—and a more nuanced and fine-grained understanding of 'imperial effects'. It makes sense to excavate deeply sedimented imperial presences—alongside colonial histories that many postcolonial scholars attend to. Rather than focus on what returns to Europe and North America from its 'overseas' adventures, we must turn to, in Stoler's (2013) words, what is left behind, what people are left with, in places where these imperial adventures have taken place.

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