Student Reaction to T.V. Paul’s Talk on Pakistan In a Comparative Perspective

Dr. Paul’s attempt to focus on silver linings notwithstanding, it remains true that Pakistan is a mess in nearly all the ways a country can be a mess. Indeed, the fact that he needed to discuss silver linings at all aptly demonstrates the darkness of the storm clouds overhead. One does not talk of silver linings on a sunny blue sky day. Still, the fact that Pakistan is such a mess does not mean we should throw up our hands and collectively say “well what can you do?” In fact, it is just the opposite. The problems of Pakistan, which The Economist a few years ago called the world’s most dangerous country, are so bad and so dangerous that they demand answers, or at least a search for answers. How did it go this bad and what can be done about it?

Dr. Paul’s talk mostly focused on the first question, though he phrased it slightly differently. His discussion of how the Pakistani government focused on security and created rent-seeking institutions and economic arrangements that privileged the military, which created an entrenched interest defending those very rent-seeking arrangements, rang true but left me a bit at a loss for how this problem gets fixed. Alas, Dr. Paul offered few solutions of his own. This is not to blame or criticize him. Pakistan’s problems are so acute precisely because there are no obvious solutions, even for a scholar as knowledgeable as Dr. Paul. His big picture solution, that Pakistan must adopt a Trading State mentality rather than always privilege security, also rang true. But again, the rub is in how to get there.

While I’m sympathetic to Dr. Paul’s big picture approach, I wish that he would have discussed the details a bit more. Details matter. One example of this was in his examination of Pakistan’s taxation system. He noted that in Pakistan less than one percent of people have paid income taxes. That’s astounding. I would have loved for Dr. Paul to explain how that came to be and why tax collection can or cannot be improved. Unfortunately, rather than do this, Dr. Paul moved onto another of Pakistan’s problems. His discussion of aid suffered from the same problem. He noted that foreign aid comprises a huge portion of Pakistan’s budget and discussed some of the problems this creates. This would have been a wonderful opportunity to weigh in on the heated debate between scholars like Jeff Sachs who claim that aid is crucial for growth and scholars like William Easterly who claim that aid actually makes states worse off And yet, Dr. Paul did not weigh in on this debate nor did he delve more deeply into how aid could be better disbursed nor did he say how Western donors could more effectively help Pakistan.

I also found it interesting that Dr. Paul made sure to convey that he was not “blaming” Pakistan. I got the sense that when he speaks to South Asian audiences they can become a bit prickly when scholars and regional experts discuss their myriad problems and thus he feels the need to soften his message. This struck me as perhaps being a bit too soft on the Pakistanis themselves. If Pakistanis are not to blame for Pakistan’s problems, who is? If Pakistanis are not the ones to change Pakistan, who will? I realize that global forces like colonialism have not dealt Pakistan a good hand but even so Pakistan’s political leaders have played that hand poorly. The obsession with the struggle against India is not the fault of foreigners. The Pakistani ISI’s willingness to coddle the Taliban is no one’s fault but theirs. Everything cannot be blamed on India or the West.

Dr. Paul’s arguments generally sounded correct. It was difficult to directly argue with anything he said, and yet I was still left with this gnawing sense that he avoided the really difficult part which is to propose concrete solutions that could be criticized or defended. I realize this reaction probably sounds highly critical though I don’t mean it to. What made Dr. Paul’s skipping of the details frustrating was his obvious wealth of knowledge on the subject. His erudition made me want to hear him talk more about everything Pakistan so in a way then he was a victim of his own success.