

Book Review

Sponsoring Sufism: How Governments Promote ‘Mystical Islam’ in their Domestic and Foreign Policies by Fait Muedini.

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Many social scientists previously considered ‘religion’ to be an “anachronism” that would succumb its socio-economic and political importance to the inexorable forces of modernity. Yet, astonishingly, in the current-day scenario at national and international levels, religion, particularly Islam, acts as a key variable in a number of politically important phenomena. This has led to a serious engagement of policy makers, political analysts, academicians etc. in deriving various inferences from the role of religion in politics (national/international). In this context, the recently launched series *Palgrave Studies in Religion, Politics, and Policy* (eds. T.G.Jelen and Mark.J.Rozel), aims at accelerating profound and insightful study within this sub-field of political science to explore the ‘public role of religion.’ Fait Muedini’s, “*Sponsoring Sufism*” is one among other issues of the same series of *Palgrave Studies*.

The post September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon has severely engaged the governments in getting the teachings of Islam examined and its

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different versions traced and defined. Ironically, in doing so, the policy makers, try to define the acts of terror through a mere religious prism by which is distinguished now a “good Muslim” from a “bad Muslim” and not a “good person” from a “bad person” or a “criminal” from a “civil citizen”. (p.1). The post 9/11 and the like, terrorist attacks have been chiefly viewed as an outcome of the so-called “radical interpretations” of the Islam. To avoid such attacks besides nullifying such interpretations on ideological grounds, Sufism has been located for yielding “tolerant” interpretation of the Islamic teachings. This, as per the author, has however led to the misconception that Sufism is always ‘apolitical’ or it has at least given way to the “false dichotomous categorization” of Muslims into “Sufi” (thus good Muslim) and “non-Sufi” (or Islamist) (pp.2-3). However, it is not always the positive message of Sufism that engages the state in promoting it “officially” (and sometimes unofficially), but there are many other underlying reasons for this. Therefore, the author tries to explore the diverse reasons and ways that germinate and sustain the Sufi-State relationship. The author is deeply interested in examining the diverse reasons for the promotion and sponsorship of *Sufism* at the behest of governing bodies within a state. The main hypothesis of the author revolves round the justification of the concept that Sufis are or have not been always “apolitical, peace loving, tolerant etc.”, (the common attributions to the Sufis in the modern world) rather they have often yielded a contradictory character (pp.33-41). Muedini substantiates his hypothesis of “Sufi-State relationship” in light of the cases of some countries like Algeria, Morocco, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Russia, Britain etc.

Before exploring the ‘Sufi-state’ relationship in light of the various proposed models operating in different regions, the author puts the discussion in an easily comprehensible form by giving precedence to some important discussions including the definitions of Sufism, its historical perception, worldly detachment of Sufis and significance of Sufi orders and the Sheikhs. Muedini is implicitly critical of the concept of “apolitical” nature of Sufis and attempts to highlight the “political” or “militant” nature of Sufi Orders, thus, denying the “peace loving, tolerant, and inclusivist attitudes” of Sufis (p.40f). The author has however,

defined ‘Sufism’ completely in western context understood by the Western scholars or Orientalists save some partial references to a few Muslim scholars. Among the major Sufi orders, the most politically active Order, the *Suhrawardī* Order, should have been made as a point of reference while describing the role of Sufis in politics but astonishingly it has been overlooked here. Besides, the author has greatly relied upon the western appreciation of the theme without exploring the classical and original textual references related to the discussion.

Algeria: AbdelazizBouteflika, Sufism, and Authoritarianism and *Morroco:King Mohammed VI, Sufism, and the Islamist Challengers*, entitle chapter 2nd and 3rd respectively that primarily focus on the causes behind the shift of government policy towards Sufi Orders in Algeria (particularly the *Tijāniya Order*) and Morroco (Budshishiyya, a sub-order of Qadiriyya Order). The promotion of Sufism by the Algerian government and the Moroccan Monarch, as per the author, is not only “to counter extremist ideologies” but to gain their electoral support as well (pp.61, 65, 77-90). The author introduces the chapters with the emergence of Sufism in Algeria, its historical importance in Morocco, its role in anti-colonialism (French colonialism) and subsequent dismissal from the government affairs by the governments utilizing initially the Islamist ideologies to denounce the Sufism fundamentally. In chapter two, the author surprisingly defines the Islamists, Salafis with their subtypes like “purist (*dawa*Salafis), political, and jihadi” (p.56) and Wahhabis, another subtype of Salafis, within the discussion that should have been otherwise included as the introductory part of the theme. Following this, Muedini tries to focus on his main theory of highlighting sponsorship of Sufism in Algeria and Morocco by the State as an “instrumentalist attempt to legitimize its rule”. (p.66) and “to obtain a desired balance” (p.76) or neutralize the effects of Jihadists/Violent Salafi groups.

The author tries to unveil the causes and modes of different regimes to manipulate a particular fraternity or group (e.g., here Sufi groups) utilizing and promoting it while believing it as ‘apolitical’ and sabotaging the same if felt ‘opposite’ for political interests (eg., *Jamiat al AdlwalIhsan* of Morocco, p.85ff.).

However, a critical assessment of the chapter two proves that the author though aiming to highlight the causes behind the sponsorship of Sufism has rather dedicated a substantial part for discussing the government, its policies and mainly its encounter with the opposite element of the society particularly the Islamist (radical) groups, which depicts a little deviation from the main theme. Further, the chapter lacks an appropriate conclusion from the author's side that instead culminates with some related inferences from a book by Khemmissi et.al. (2012, p.65f) focusing on the public opinion regarding Sufism. There are also some meager typographical errors like Hiyab (p.51) instead of Hijab and Hiyaz instead of Hijaz (p.55), Maeemi instead of Naeemi (p.110) and inconsistencies like Budshishiya, Bushishiyya, Buthchichiyya (p.77ff). Further, the term *Ahl-e-Hadithis* not defined and differentiated technically vis-a-vis the terms like *Wahabism* and *Salfism* (p.97). The author erroneously marks "*Barelwi*" as a Sufi order (p.98, 111), as the person allegedly attributed with its foundation, Ahmad Raza Khan, never established any such "Order" and was himself an adherent of Qadiriyya Order.¹

Chapter fourth is entitled as *Appealing to Sufi orders and Shrines: The Case of Government Sufi Advocacy in Pakistan*. Introducing the relevance of the theme, the author underscores the historical roots of Sufi-State relationship pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Indo-Pak subcontinent. The author gives reasons as to how and why the leaders like Ayub Khan and Bhutto, though associated with Shrines, tried "to limit the influence" (p.106) of the *Sajjadah Nashins* or *Pirs* or the prevailing successors of the grand Sufis. The author also highlights General Zia ulHaq's measures in this regard. Highlighting Sufism as "moderate" message of Islam and restricting the influence of *Shaykhs* or *Sajjadah Nashins* for political interests has been a characteristic position of Pakistani administrators. The author examines the largesse engagement of Sufi background personalities in active politics like Pakistan People's Party etc and the recent violent measures of Taliban and other radical organizations against the Sufis, *Shrines* and their impact in Pakistan. Muedini describes the development of Sufi Organizations (particularly Barelvis) to counter the violent actions of the fundamentalists like Taliban besides deliberating over the promotion of Sufism by the

administrators like Musharaf, Zaradri etc. to evade the alarming threat inflicted by the violence, hostility and conflict prevalent in Pakistan.

Muedini repeats the almost same scenario in chapter 5, *“Promoting Sufism in Russia, Chechnya, and Uzbekistan*, providing the examples of pre and post Soviet Republics of Russian Federation like Dagestan, Chechnya and Uzbekistan, the former Soviet Republic of Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan (pp.125-52). He illustrates the quelling and persecution of whatever they perceived of Islamic identity particularly Sufism during Soviet period and the shift of government policy towards Sufism with the rise of extremists and violent strains in these areas in the aftermath of the disintegration of USSR or in the ‘post communist state’. The author identifies the causes behind the curiosity of political leaders in sponsoring Sufism in these areas besides highlighting the exchange of benefits in the Sufi-State relationship.

One of the important ways to promote Sufism, the author highlights, is academia, education and proliferation of Sufi-oriented literature besides maintaining its socio-cultural significance. However, it is to be noted that only Sufism is not manipulated to neutralize extremism, other possible ways and means are also used and it can be assumed that on ideological grounds Sufism is brought as a bulwark to ‘Islamism’. The author examines that the political leaders choose Sufism as an antidote to Islamism (particularly its violent form) for the reason of its malleability and flexibility as opposed to the rigidity and hostility of Islamists. In each case the author underscores the possible criticism(s) made on the ‘Sufi-Sponsorship’ approach of the governments’ and concludes with a notion of critical assessment of the promotion of “Sufism” as the sole form of a moderate and peaceful religious interpretation and highlights the impact of the possible implications of this relationship.

Apart from citing the example of Muslim-majority countries, the author has attempted to highlight the theme “Sufism-Sponsorship” in the West. Chapter 6, *“The Promotion of Sufism in the West: Britain and the United States”* (pp.153-73) discusses the antiterrorist policies brought into action in the form of formulations and amendments of “Acts” in

Britain and USA in the aftermath of the series of terrorist attacks carried in the beginning of the current century. Muedini exemplifies the impact of the terrorist attacks and the subsequent counter terrorism policies by the US and UK governments on the Muslim immigrants and their survival in these states. It is in this context, the author examines the promotion of Sufism in the West (UK, US), though not as a high-level government project, as in the previous cases of Muslim majority lands. In both the cases, the author expects, the governments would obviously opt for Sufism as a part of the sweeping counter terrorism policy.

Concluding the discussion, the author underscores that a particular group or groups should be promoted for the purpose of human rights security and the like, and not “merely because of religious identification”. This he explains by arguing that the same States promoting Sufism utterly fail in securing the human rights for their citizens. Thus, these group (s) are sponsored merely for political interests like suppressing and neutralizing the opposition e.g., Sufism against the rise of Islamists and the later to counter the secular and communist groups especially in post-independence scenario. Interestingly, Muedini has tried to highlight the Sufis as “political”, (thus, not too much different from the “Islamists”) and has substantiated this by various examples throughout its history especially in the colonial era, yet interestingly, he is unable to locate them as of “violent” character (like that of modern suicide bombers etc.).

The book is supplemented with a sound bibliography and an index. Lucidity of the language, ample references and contextualization of every theme makes the book a valuable and useful literary piece. Lastly, the book provides ample incentives for further research into this significant and interdisciplinary field and is a good piece of research expected to be valued significantly in the academic and intellectual circles.

¹See, for example, M. ManzoorAlam, ed., *100 Great Muslim Leaders of the 20th Century* (New Delhi: Institute of Objective Studies, 2005), pp. 207-210.