

**Zoha Waseem**, *Insecure Guardians: Enforcement, Encounters, and Everyday Policing in Postcolonial Karachi*, London: Hurst Publishers, 2022. ISBN: 9781787386884 (cloth)

On 9 May 2023, Pakistan's former prime minister Imran Khan was arrested inside the Islamabad High Court by the Pakistan Rangers on corruption charges. The Rangers are a pair of paramilitary law enforcement corps comprising of the Sindh and Punjab Rangers who provide "assistance to police" and maintain "law and order whenever it is necessary" (Pakistan Rangers Ordinance 1959). While Khan was released shortly after the Supreme Court declared his arrest illegal, the arrest in itself dramatically escalated tensions between him, the police, and the military. After his arrest, thousands of his supporters attacked and set fire to buildings, including army headquarters, targeting police and military installations. While Khan's arrest intensifies an already escalating political crisis as Pakistan tries to overcome its economic crisis with the newly secured IMF bailout, his arrest, and its aftermath, are significant. While arrests of politicians and large political protests are common in Pakistan, it is rare for the police or military to be targeted as they are most powerful institutions in the country.

Much like Khan's arrest, *Insecure Guardians*, which explores the role of policing in postcolonial Karachi, begins with an anecdote that involves both the police and the Sindh Rangers. The book opens with the death of 17-year-old Naqeebullah Mehsud who was shot dead by the Karachi police and Sindh Rangers in a "police encounter" in 2018 as he was believed to be a member of a regional terrorist organisation. Shortly after, it was revealed this was entirely false. An aspiring model and shopkeeper by profession, Mehsud had no such affiliations (p 3). This discovery led to a nation-wide movement and inquiry against extrajudicial killings (or "encounters" as they are called). However, this backlash was unique, Waseem states; such cases and the law enforcement agencies behind them are never questioned, criticised, or investigated. One year later, militarised policing and police-encounter killings had resurfaced in Karachi, targeting the most marginalised groups in the city. And the perpetrators behind these encounters, who are equally marginalised police officers, intensified their efforts to be "super cops" in a state that glorifies them and legitimises their use of violence.

The police “are not merely an administrative function of law enforcement”, writes Agamben (2000: 104), but an institution that is “always operating within a ... state of exception”. While much research has been done on how the police operate within this state of exception, and as a tool of governance, in the Global North (Watson and Kerrigan 2018), there is an urgent need for ethnographically rich scholarship that looks at policing in postcolonial countries. This involves looking at the multidimensional nature of policing in the Global South which includes its complex links to all facets of violent colonial administration, and an acknowledgement of the socioeconomic, political, and contextual realities of today. While scholars like Jauregui (2016) and Yonucu (2022) have responded to this need with research on police and police work in India and Turkey, Waseem responds to this gap in scholarship by looking at the nexus between crime and terrorism in postcolonial Karachi, and what the police and law enforcement agencies are doing in response to these various forms of violence. In order to study this “culture of policing”, she focuses on Pakistan where no research has been done on the police when it is the most important, the most impactful, and the most problematic public institution, and carries out ethnographic work in Karachi—a city “notorious for its violent, extrajudicial, and corrupt policing practices” (p.8).

But how does *Insecure Guardians* intervene? Building on 20 months of fieldwork that looked at everyday policing, the lived experiences of police officers, police culture, and violent security operations, the book introduces a new, and timely, concept of a “postcolonial condition of policing”. This concept unpacks how the police operate in postcolonial Karachi by contextualising policing—looking at its links to colonialism, how it is practised, and how it is interpreted, all from a Global South perspective. It takes as a given that researching the police is not merely looking at police themselves or the institution, but a way of understanding how the state functions, and in order to do this one must first look at how history and contemporary forms of governmentality are connected. The first intervention asks us to connect the colonial past of policing to our postcolonial present. The book asks if there is a unique way of understanding the culture of policing in certain jurisdictions that are characterised by their colonial past as well as their colonial present? In the case of Pakistan, Waseem reveals that successive governments have essentially and very consciously retained certain traits of colonial policing in their postcolonial governance (p.104). She traces this to the insecurity that was very much part of the British empire, especially in places like India

and Pakistan where military coups, dictatorships, and military interventions were not exceptional, but rather common. In the face of such insecurity, the state was, and still remains, insecure. As a result, every political, social, economic issue that emerges becomes a national emergency, and the postcolonial state has no reason to do away with institutions that serve and are loyal to the state. This in turn made the police *the* institution to maintain regime security, as well as serve the regime, and we see this continuing today—not only in Pakistan, but in other postcolonial contexts such as India, Nigeria, Ghana, and beyond.

The second intervention the book makes is that it reveals the two factors that shape this “postcolonial condition of policing”—militarisation and procedural informality. Pakistan’s postcolonial politics has long been shaped by periods of military rule. The military establishment has long been a key political actor and has emerged as the most powerful institution in the country, and one that does not allow “civilian structures [to] develop and strengthen beyond a particular point” (p.227). This has resulted in the military creating separate paramilitary organisations (such as the Rangers) to carry out certain policing responsibilities and getting involved in the maintenance of public order, which in turn has led to an ideology of militarism in the police force. The result, Waseem argues, is a police force who much like its violent colonial predecessors prioritise “regime security” over human or public safety, and perpetuate a militarised landscape (p.31).

A key feature of this militarised landscape is procedural informality, which is the other integral aspect of postcolonial policing. Like in the colonial era, rank and file officers are often recruited from economically vulnerable segments of the population, who make up almost 95% of the force, and continue to remain in precarious positions. This sets the terms of engagement for subordinate police officers, expecting them to operate outside legal frameworks and engage in informal practices to implement leadership policies or meet community demands. These practices include informal means of generating funds and violations of due process, such as unlawful detentions and extrajudicial violence, and the police officers are expected to deliver on a range of policies and demands made by elites and the state with very little resources, and very little guarantee of their own personal safety or job security. Combined with militarisation, this creates a state of insecurity for rank-and-file officers who are simultaneously empowered by giving them weapons and power which results in vigilante behaviour, yet disempowered as these are the same poorly paid officers

who look for financial rewards and resort to corruption to make basic ends meet. This hyper-empowerment and simultaneous disempowerment, militarisation and informality, Waseem writes,

... are interconnected phenomena and outcomes of the post-colonial condition of policing which emerge out of the inherited design and practices of colonial policing structures being redeployed to meet the demands of the insecure post-colonial state pursuing consolidation and legitimacy. (p.264)

But can a book that extensively examines how policing is practised, interpreted, and assessed, and how the interconnected phenomena of informality and militarisation come together to serve a postcolonial state ultimately serve or inform the police? Waseem intervenes here by first noting that the book informs the sociology of the police, and not a sociology for the police, and is very careful to distinguish between research that could ultimately inform the police, or ultimately benefit law enforcement agencies, and research on the deep institution of the police itself that informs *Insecure Guardians*. Such research entails looking at, among other things, what police officers are doing, in what kind of political environments and under what socioeconomic constraints they operate in, their interpersonal relationships, their relationships with other institutions, and what sort of ethnic and racial divisions exist amongst the police. In the end, this book emerges as an investigation into police culture itself. Not only is it an investigation into what is wrong with policing, but it's also a foray into forms of policing practices, where they emerge from, how they are justified, and how this all becomes a part of global conversations around institutional racism, sexism, and authoritarianism.

This in turn precipitates critical questions about the ethical complexities and entanglements of doing research on the police. How does one remain objective when watching informal practices such as bribes and threats, or hearing about illegal practices such as "china-cutting" where police are involved in encroaching on public land, dividing it, and selling it (p.134)? And more importantly how does one remain objective when witnessing violence, as Waseem does when she saw a "criminal" being shot in the leg by a uniformed constable? Does witnessing such acts, or being told of illegal acts, and the role of being a detached observer, make one complicit in this violence? Waseem acknowledges her

“biographical ethnographic kinship” (p. 40) in relation to the access she gained due to being the daughter of a high-ranking police officer and being seen as part of the “police family” in the Global South, and reinforces the need to talk about one’s position as a researcher and access as an ethnographer. Negotiating access in order to write about the Global South as Waseem does, as a scholar from the Global South, makes this an insightful example of scholarship breaking away from Northern knowledge centres. *Insecure Guardians* is an exercise in what it means to write about what you witness, however troubling, in order to contextualise it, and the need to acknowledge the past and be aware of the present, in the hope of informing the future.

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*September 2023*