

Nicholas Schmidle's *To Live or to Perish Forever*

Reviewed by David Waterman

To Live or to Perish Forever: Two Tumultuous Years in Pakistan. Nicholas Schmidle. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2009. 255 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8050-8938-7.

Nicholas Schmidle's book is the result of a project funded by the Institute of Current World Affairs, the author having been chosen as a Phillips Talbot Fellow in 2006; while Schmidle's original destination was Iran, the hard-line anti-American rhetoric following the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad caused him to change course for Pakistan instead. The book takes its title from Rahmat Ali's 1933 pamphlet "Now or Never; Are We to Live or Perish For Ever?," advocating a separate state of Pakistan, published three years after Iqbal made public his idea of a semi-autonomous political entity within an Indian federation (7). A combination of contemporary history / geopolitics and travel memoir, the book gives behind-the-scenes accounts of the implosive / explosive formula of twenty-first century Pakistan, its credibility founded on the personal risk to Schmidle himself. The informal tone generally succeeds in making facts, figures and person / place names more engaging for a wider audience – by which I mean outside the Beltway – although regrettably the tone does occasionally slip into a semi-gonzo journalism that Hunter Thompson would have recognized: "Musharraf lost his mojo," for example (10).

Contemporary Pakistan did not come about overnight, and Schmidle does a very good job of tracing the historical context for readers who are perhaps a bit rusty on such details, whether the 1400-year-old conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims (16), or the more recent geopolitical stutterings which led to the Taliban's 1996 victory in Afghanistan (19). Schmidle's principal strong point, however, is his ability to give a human face to those he meets along the way, and in doing so invites the reader into the story; here he succeeds where many others do not. His philosophy from the start of this unlikely project is to be frank with those he encounters, revealing his identity as an American, non-Muslim and writer, combined with a genuine interest in learning the language and meeting people from all social strata. His approach pays off, as many of those he meets are men of power and in-

fluence, able to open doors for him and, when necessary, get him out of a tight spot. Indeed, without such protection and valuable advice, it seems almost inconceivable that Schmidle would have survived; as it is, his ability to remain in Pakistan for two years before being deported is outstanding.

His first immersion in Pakistani politics comes about when he is invited to attend a large Shia gathering, where Allama Abbas Kumaili's sermon, recalling the story of Hussein, sends the crowd into a frenzy (26). Shortly thereafter he makes the acquaintance of Farooq Sattar, a member of the National Assembly and leader of the Muttahida Quami Movement, who introduces him, on the way to a funeral in Hyderabad, to the intricacies of *mohajir* politics, those Muslims who moved from India to Pakistan in 1947; both the rally and the funeral highlight for Schmidle the fact that Pakistanis tend to vote according to their ethnic or sectarian allegiance, regardless of a specific party's platform (29; 38). A visit to a ten-day workshop entitled "Madrassas and the Modern World" allows the author to see reformers at work, in this case Dr. Shazia of Karachi University, as she tries to bring up to date an audience of mullahs by pointing out that a free market, credit cards and Wal-Mart are all compatible with Islam: "shocking the madrassa teachers seemed to be [her] unstated goal" (57). While in the West madrassas are understood as Koranic schools for training extremists, we are reminded that within Pakistan such schools are more often seen as a way for poor families to educate their children, a role that the State often fails to ensure. "Our problem in Pakistan," says Dr. Ata-ur-Rahman, "is not the madrassas. Our problem is clean drinking water. Our problem is sanitation. Our problem is health care," thus effectively placing poverty at the foundation of other social ills (62). A case in point: the unrest in Baluchistan, linked to poverty in one of the most underdeveloped regions of the country, and the government's insincerity with promises of turning the fishing village of Gwadar into a modern, economically vibrant port city (70-71); Schmidle's own conversations with Baluchi opposition leader Akhtar Mengal will immediately attract the attention of Pakistan's intelligence agencies.

In an effort to understand all of Pakistan, especially its apparent identity crisis, Schmidle makes the journey to the "other" Pakistan, Bangladesh, to cover upcoming elections, although they are cancelled just as he arrives by the President, Iajuddin Ahmed, who then declared martial law (106). Schmidle notes that even in Bangladesh, founded as a secular country, Islam is appropriated in the interest of attracting political allies (108). Returning to Karachi, the author finds himself in a city under siege, the result of a planned visit by suspended Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, perhaps Musharraf's most powerful enemy; Schmidle cites this event on May 12, 2007, as the point of no return for Pakistan's President, "willing to subvert law and order to keep power" (127). The next nail in Musharraf's

coffin, described in detail by Schmidle, is “Operation Silence,” the storming of the Red Mosque in Islamabad to dislodge opposition forces led by Abdul Rashid Ghazi; Bin Laden himself condemned the President’s actions (154).

Never one to shy away from a dangerous situation, the author then heads for the Taliban-controlled Swat Valley, only a four-hour drive from the capital, what he calls “a different kind of Pakistan” (158), a visit made possible only through the protection and *laisser-passer* of Iqbal Khan, the District Amir, a journey which permits Schmidle to meet a large number of Taliban commanders (167). Back in Islamabad, Benazir Bhutto had just recently returned from exile, and her presence in the country, added to the pressure on Musharraf stemming from the lingering Chaudhry affair, lead the President to impose a state of emergency, seen by many in Pakistan as meddling by the CIA on Musharraf’s behalf. At the end of December 2007, Benazir Bhutto was assassinated, plunging the country into yet another political crisis, and paving the way for Asif Ali Zardari to inherit the Pakistan People’s Party and thus confront Musharraf; eight months later he resigned the Presidency. Schmidle closes the book with a surreal description of his second departure from Pakistan, tracked by “the agencies” as he leaves with a US Embassy escort in a bullet-proof car, amid news reports of his own kidnapping (229).

Nicholas Schmidle worries about the future of Pakistan – not simply the Pakistan of violence, not simply the Pakistan which is a keystone of geopolitics, but the Pakistan with a human face, where people construct their lives among poverty and insecurity, where people worry about educating their children and obtaining medical care. Practical, everyday worries so often overlooked in Western accounts of Pakistan, and that Schmidle’s book does an excellent job of bringing to the fore. *To Live or to Perish Forever* is recommended for those readers who want to attach human faces and individual stories to the “problem” of Pakistan.