Culture of Exemptions: Protecting and Reinforcing Privilege & Power in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

In the context of intensifying political crises in Pakistan and deepening social inequality, my PhD research in anthropology, titled ‘Culture of Exemptions: the Creation and Replication of Power and Privilege Amongst the Pakistani Elite,’ challenges widely held assumptions regarding the political and economic conditions that perpetuate elite power and privilege in developing countries, and severely limit opportunities for social mobility. In contrast to accounts of elite power that have represented elite interests—and their pursuit of power and privilege—as generic and self-explanatory, I show how elite interests in Pakistan, and the specific efforts taken to advance them, are both generated and legitimized by both incremental processes of structural violence and repetitive cycles of political and economic instability.

My research explores the impact of cyclical political and economic crises on the generation of an exclusionary form of collaboration and mutual support amongst a nation’s elites. Elites generate a particular form of intimacy and affiliation through social practices involving, for instance, attendance at exclusive events and the sharing of black market alcohol, and through strategic intra-elite marriages that facilitate the circulation of social, cultural and economic capital amongst a very small group of peers. I demonstrate that in generating intra-elite affiliations and intimacy, elites fortify the ability of their members to withstand the most deleterious effects of recurring crises and reconstitute their power in accordance with shifting political and economic conditions.

In reviewing the motivations and moralities of the Pakistani business elite, I argue that the normative process of elites seeking exemptions to processes of the State is both validated and legitimized by elite perceptions of Pakistan as “the crisis state.” As a result of the legal exemptions political and economic crises enable, I contend that members of the Pakistani elite actively generates the crises that legitimate their non-compliance with law and regulation. Further, I argue that the Pakistani business elite has fostered a tightly circumscribed social universe inhabited only by the kin, elite peers and economic dependents to which they have responsibilities. Within this insulated universe, I demonstrate that the business elite are highly moral individuals fulfilling a vast array of responsibilities and obligations.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Rosita Armytage is a PhD Candidate in Anthropology at the Australian National University researching the creation and protection of privilege and power in Pakistan through an ethnography of the informal and social practices of Pakistan’s business and political elite. She completed 13 months of field research in Lahore, Islamabad, Karachi and parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2013 and 2014.

DATE

Tuesday, 23 February 2016

TIME

3.00pm to 4.30pm

VENUE

Malay Studies Seminar Room, AS7 #04-13, Kent Ridge Campus, NUS