

# **Rule by Fear: Conceptualizing Democracy and Authoritarianism in Pakistan**

Wednesday 1 June 2022, by [JAN Ammar Ali](#) (Date first published: 27 January 2022).

**Ammar Ali Jan (Haqooq-e-Khalq Movement) speaks at the Oxford South Asian Intellectual History Seminar on 17 January 2022. For queries, please contact the seminar convenor at [saih.history.ox.ac.uk](mailto:saih.history.ox.ac.uk).**

This talk will discuss salient features of authoritarian rule in Pakistan. First, the permanent state of emergency that shapes political life in the country fuels arbitrary and whimsical forms of governance. The perpetual violation of the constitution by the ruling classes tells us that rather than viewing the Pakistani state as theocratic, it might be better to suggest that the country's crisis results from the fact that it lacks any political theology or sacred document. Second, the case of missing persons is emblematic of the nature of power in the country as it is the invisible ink through which sovereign power simultaneously reveals and veils itself. Such disavowed forms of violence show that "erasure" remains a central, yet under examined aspect of the exercise of modern power. Finally, the controlled nature of democracy in Pakistan results in a tense dynamic between the form and content of authoritarian rule. For historical reasons, democracy is the necessary form through which authoritarian rule is justified in the country, a contradiction that also opens up important space for oppositional politics. Carefully considering these themes makes it possible to intervene in debates on the global itinerary of democracy and resistance in the time of global authoritarianism.

Dr Ammar Ali Jan is an academic and left-wing political activist based in Lahore, Pakistan. Dr Jan has a Doctorate in History from the University of Cambridge, where he worked on the encounter between anti-colonial thought and Marxism in colonial India. His book, *Rule by Fear: Eight Theses on Authoritarianism in Pakistan* (Folio Books, 2021), explains the political, economic and social roots of authoritarianism in the country, focusing on the structural features propelling the rising militarisation of society. He is a regular contributor to a number of leading publications, including *The News International*, *Al-Jazeera*, *EPW* and *The Jacobin*. At present, Dr. Jan is a member of the Haqooq-e-Khalq (People's Rights) Movement, an anti-capitalist organisation that is working among workers, farmers, students and women to build an alternative political project. He is also a Cabinet Member of the Progressive International and does a weekly show on *Naya Daur*. Dr Jan was recently fired from his teaching post and charged with sedition as part of a crackdown against dissenting voices.

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**Ammar Ali Jan**

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