TRIBAL DURABILITY: EXPLAINING AUTONOMY AMONG THE PASHTUN FRONTIER TRIBES


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Pakistan’s Northwest Frontier Region, along the border with Afghanistan, is home to a number of Pashtun tribes that continue to remain politically autonomous. Wresting control of this territory has been the object of numerous efforts by various alien rulers over the years, none of whom have been successful. The ability of these particular tribes to resist co-optation is unique. As recently as the mid-nineteenth century, the social and political landscape of the regions surrounding these Pashtun frontier tribes has changed such that in adjacent areas state law has usurped tribal law, and tribes have given way to “tribal groups.” The goal of this dissertation is to explain why the Pashtun frontier tribes have remained durable as politically autonomous groups existing in contradistinction to the state. Specifically, this research rests on the premise that tribal durability depends on organizational structure. These tribes have remained durable because they are uniquely non-hierarchical. In egalitarian tribal systems, no one tribe’s leader answers to any other, so co-optation must occur piecemeal – so costly and time-consuming that it is virtually impossible for would-be central rulers. In contrast, in hierarchical tribal systems, sub-tribes are controlled by a leading tribe and its ruler. Control one tribal chief, and an alien ruler can co-opt a whole region of tribes. This is not to say egalitarian tribes are impossible to control, but control is possible only to an extent, and only under particular circumstances. Whereas hierarchical tribal systems experience some social differentiation and legal institutionalization (the leading tribe has authority over matters of internal conflict or dispute) a lack of hierarchy among tribes means that the law is “lived” through daily interactions, not expressed through formal legal institutions. To co-opt this sort of tribal system, one must essentially embrace the tribes’ “lived law,” or their traditional normative and cultural code legitimized by tradition. This suggests that the “co-optation” of egalitarian tribes is really not co-optation at all; it is merely the maintenance of order – their order. I focus on a crucial historical period in which the most concerted and enduring effort to impose central authority on the Pakistan tribes was attempted: the British imperial project. I use comparative-historical methods to examine cases of frontier tribal administration by the British during their rule in India. Using a most-similar case comparison strategy, I compare the peaceful co-optation of Baluchstain in the mid to late 1880s to the failed co-optation of parts of the Pashtun frontier during the early 1880s and mid-1880s. I also use the most-similar case comparison strategy to show how differences in directness of rule do not explain durability while differences in adherence to local customs do. I chose three cases of British administration of the Pashtun to address British variation in degree of centralization and adherence to British norms of law: Frederick Mackeson’s governance of the Khyber (1839-1842), Herbert Edwardes and Reynell Taylor’s administration of Bannu (1845-1851), and John Nicholson’s rule of Bannu (1851-1857). I demonstrate that not only are egalitarian tribes perpetually durable, but that compliance can be obtained only by governing according to local rules and customs.