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**“Property Rights and ‘the Logic of Local Politics’  
in Colonial and Postcolonial Punjab”**

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This paper concerns the relationship between *Shari'ah*, landed property, and local politics in the Muslim-majority districts of western Punjab. More specifically, it examines local approaches to the question of inheritance during the last 150 years, as the (formal) laws of inheritance were changed from “the laws of custom” (under the British) to “the laws of Islam” (in Pakistan). By drawing on administrative records from the colonial archives (e.g., landed property records) and more than 1,500 civil cases filed in the postcolonial district courts of Lahore, Sialkot, and Sargodha, this paper examines the ways in which this transition from custom to *Shari'ah* affected the logic of local politics. In particular, it shows how local politicians have come to be selected, not on the basis of their ability to amend or improve existing laws; but rather, on the basis of their ability to circumvent, or avoid, the implementation of Islamic laws that threaten to shatter existing ancestral estates. More specifically, I show how small, medium, and large Muslim landowners have come to interact with “democratic institutions” in postcolonial Punjab to preserve a rather distinctively un-Islamic - pattern of agnatic (all-male) inheritance. Ultimately, this paper shows how the shift from custom to *Shari'ah* has engendered an entirely new logic of democratic accountability. Ordinarily, politicians are elected on the basis of their ability to enforce, or improve, existing laws. But in the Punjab, the introduction of religious laws widely regarded as “immutable” has altered this pattern. Here, the terms of democratic accountability do not lie in promoting better laws; rather, they lie in circumventing, or cheating, existing (Islamic) laws.