In response to the “AAS officers” statement regarding the Pakistani ban at AAS in India.

Over the past several days, scholars from a broad range of political and social spectra have spoken out in protest after learning that the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) was complicit in the Indian government’s exclusion of Pakistani nationals and individuals of Pakistani descent from an AAS-in-Asia conference to be held at Ashoka University in July. On June 11, the Association issued an unsigned statement from “AAS Officers on the 2018 AAS-in-Asia Conference.”

To our knowledge, a group of over 600 South Asian scholars signed a letter condemning the AAS for its decision-making and participating in the Government of India’s anti-Pakistani ban (which translates, in effect, into an anti-Muslim ban); a boycott letter is now making the rounds and garnering widespread support; individuals and smaller collectives have written expressing their dismay and lack of confidence in this set of AAS officers to do the right thing.

The statement issued by the unnamed AAS Officers responded to dissenting AAS members by simply reiterating the practical decisions the leadership made. The response noted, correctly, that there are almost no “politically uncomplicated countr[ies]” in Asia, but then went on to suggest that scholars who were critical of those decisions lacked an understanding of real-world challenges constraining international scholarly collaboration. The response concluded with the pronouncement that “fostering intellectual exchange . . . will involve compromises rather than stances of absolute moral purity.”

Why would the AAS officers—who we can assume to be the president and president-inwaiting, among others—dismiss political dissent in this non-dialogic way? We regret this dismissal of a principled political difference. Far from advocating anything pure or absolute, AAS members who disagree with AAS Officers are registering a vocal protest against the GOI’s a priori violation of freedom of scholarly exchange through the restrictions they are enforcing on Pakistani scholars (nationals and descent); we are protesting the corresponding lack of a strong moral or political stance on this issue under the current leadership of AAS, as the scholarly organization in which we are members. AAS is appropriately the target of our protest as AAS is the organization that ostensibly represents its members to the world.

As scholars, one of our métiers is to be vigilant of state-sponsored oppressions and to challenge them. Indeed, in February 2017, the AAS itself posted a statement, signed personally by then-president Laurel Kendall on behalf of the AAS Board of Directors, “strongly opposing” the Trump Administration’s Executive Order banning citizens of several preeminently Muslim nations. This precedent shows that AAS elected representatives CAN and DID express criticism of “politically complicated” countries and that they have done so in their own names. As we—and AAS as an organization—oppose the Muslim ban in the United States, so must we oppose the India ban on Pakistani scholars in India. Yet, a decision to the contrary was taken by AAS Officers in the name of its membership, without our permission, and without even consulting us.
We, the undersigned, all members of the Association for Asian Studies request an open and public accounting of how this AAS-in-Asia conference was planned, whether and/or why the leadership of the AAS was unaware of the GOI’s discriminatory policy—which was very well known to Indian scholars. We must know how the Association determined actions they would take in response to the ban and why it took the Officers five months to publicly acknowledge the effect the ban would have on the Ashoka conference. We understand that a generic letter was posted in March on the AAS website; but members were not notified of the matter. To claim otherwise is administrative double-talk. The accounting we insist on having cannot happen in the form of a one-sided letter, which reiterates past decisions. Instead, it should be a live, two-way dialogue in which leadership and members discuss processes, decisions, and plans for this specific case as well as for the larger “AAS-in-Asia” project.

Towards the end of building trust, we require that this letter, along with all other letters sent to AAS—pro and con—be sent by direct email to all AAS members, and that all letters pro and con be posted on the AAS website. Further, we recommend that at the March 2019 Denver meeting, significant time be set aside for a public two-way dialogue that is transparent, civil, and productive.

positions collective

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Rebecca Karl (New York University)
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Christopher Lupke (University of Alberta)
Boreth Ly (University of California, Santa Cruz)
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Mimi Thi Nguyen (University of Illinois)
Alessandro Russo (University of Bologna)
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Aminda Smith (Michigan State University)
Patricia Spyer (Graduate Institute, Geneva)
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