

# Reclaiming the realm of politics | The Express Tribune

*Abbas Moosvi May 25, 2023*

The working class must rise. Now.

the writer is a research fellow at the pakistan institute of development economics he tweets  
abbasmoosvi

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@AbbasMoosvi

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Politics in the contemporary world is characterised by a hyper attention on the self as a basic starting point. The vast majority of citizens begin their analyses with the conditions around them by considering the nature of their own lives and particular circumstances, and it is only after their needs and desires are addressed do they begin to think of others. This perverse culture of narcissism has fuelled libertarian notions of ‘live and let live’ and ‘survival of the fittest’ — which function to divert attention from structural imbalances in power relations responsible for primary grievances in the first place.

Philosopher John Rawls, in his notion of ‘the veil of ignorance’, offers a departure from this modality. He argues that policies ought to be deliberated upon from the assumption that one does not, in fact, know their own identity in society. In other words, he encourages a move beyond particular concerns, grievances and preferences: replacing them with a broader, bird’s eye view of the polity. This, he claims, will reorient approaches to ‘the political’ in a manner that ensures the forest is not missed for the trees. The key point here is that when people are not aware of who they might be, they will — as a default — optimise for the possibility of being amongst the most vulnerable: simply as a precautionary measure. When enough citizens are on board with this programme, it will function to lift the ‘floor’ (most marginalised) on an ongoing basis — leading to a net overall improvement in the quality of lives.

An important premise for Rawls is that the real world is not much different to his ‘veil of ignorance’ — whereby everyone experiences both advantages and disadvantages purely due to the accident of birth. Being born into privilege opens up access to certain perks, assets, networks, etc that collectively function as a kind of escalator — in which the person in question will almost as a default move upwards, regardless of their contribution to society. On the other hand, being born into poverty restricts access to even the fundamentals: education, healthcare, housing, access to information, etc — which combine to obstruct even the most talented individuals from ‘self-actualising’ and creating an

impact in the world. Stephen Gould, a pioneering evolutionary biologist, put it best: “I am, somehow, less interested in the weight and convolutions of Einstein’s brain than in the near certainty that people of equal talent have lived and died in cotton fields and sweatshops.”

Rawls is an important figure because within the capitalist modality, incentive structures are geared to promoting the interests of those with pre-existing access to finance. This is because the more wealth one accumulates, the more they are in a position to promote their interests by strategically directing funds to political leaders/parties that will push them. This can take various forms. Lobbying, for instance, is when corporations pay members of parliament to reduce taxes, push subsidies, cut regulation and facilitate preferential access to certain spaces in order to ease business processes. Indeed, this strategy is routinely deployed by executive boards in a serious, calculated manner — and is seen as an investment. On the other hand, a media domain that is primarily populated by private, for-profit firms naturally means that the overarching narrative will always be shaped by the donors they work for: who conceal certain kinds of information while exaggerating others in order to ‘manufacture consent’ for a particular political agenda. In Pakistan, the elaborate politics of patronage around ‘electables’ is a great case in point: parties will direct tickets (for seats in provincial/national assemblies) to big, powerful landlords who can guarantee votes in their respective constituencies through coercive means. In the absence of land reform, these leeches have ensured that genuine democratisation remains a pipe dream.

The trouble with notions of ‘neoliberalism’ (i.e. the elimination of government from every sphere) is precisely that it assumes that something has ‘gone wrong’ in the otherwise effective institutional arrangements, which certain tweaks can redress. As countless socialist political leaders around the globe historically have pointed out, democracy in its traditional sense i.e. one-person-one-vote is impossible under capitalism: which is a system that by design will operate on a one-dollar-one-vote basis. The bulk of what passes as ‘politics’ today is a set of artificially constructed identity-based battles (on race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, etc) between various factions in society — making for a war that has little to no bearing on the status quo. The individuals involved in these are convinced they are fighting the good fight and enhancing levels of justice: but at an aggregate level, this works out quite well for ruling elites who can continue accumulating wealth without having to worry about a consolidated pressure group challenging their power. Indeed, this was the very logic deployed during colonial times — whereby groups were painstakingly divided up based on arbitrary factors to constantly keep people at each other’s throats.

Businesses frequently capitalise upon this tendency too, producing merchandise such as tees, mugs, posters, etc depicting ‘revolutionary struggle’ that are gobbled up by ‘activists’ — thus transforming even the political struggle into a mindless consumerist activity. One fundamental reason for why this is possible is to circle back to the beginning of this essay, a hyper-focus on the self: whereby one’s politics is conflated with their identity, which they see as a means for attaining status rather than

pursuing genuine change. This creates the impression that there is some actual contestation taking place between various stakeholders for the power corridors, but the parameters of this battle are so narrow that it may as well be non-existent. In the words of the Merovingian in *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), “Choice is an illusion created between those with power and those without.”

Mainstream parties in Pakistan, just like around the globe, operate on trivial differences in narrative structure (such as corruption, dynastic royalty, glories of an imagined past) that ensure that the real power centres i.e. security apparatus, big landlords, rent-seeking industrialists, corporate bigwigs, international financial institutions, etc remain isolated from criticism.

In the absence of a reset that centres class as the fundamental unit of analysis for politics, the domain will continue to serve as a platform for opportunistic elites to stage theatrical displays for the public — no different from reality television. The working class must rise. Now.

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