

# ELITE CAPTURE BY MERITOCRACY: The Meritocracy Paradox in Pakistan

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Elite capture is when a small, privileged group exploits public resources and opportunities reserved for the broader population, perpetuating income inequality and leading to societal disruption. The criterion of 'being an elite' varies from society to society or even from person to person. Typically, elite capture is viewed from the perspective of the 'decision makers' making decisions for their benefit and negating the needs of the marginalized segments of society thus leading to the 'capture of state'. They can be political leaders, corporate executives, and even government officials.

For years there has been a growing nuisance around the globe to opt for merit-base selection as the only criteria for acquiring any high position in society. Scholars worldwide like Confucius, Plato, Aristotle, and John Stuart Mill advocate the same merit-based selection as the only solution to combat the system's inefficiencies. But does it fulfill the job or just create another elite class?

The term meritocracy was first coined by sociologist Aklan Fox in 1956 and later used by Michael Young in his book 'The Rise of Meritocracy'. Meritocratic elite capture comprises specific strata in which individuals are evaluated based on their skills or merit and dominate decision-making processes giving rise to disparities in society. They can be tech industry leaders, entrepreneurs, scientists, or military personnel. This article talks about the atrocities arising in society because of meritocratic elite capture and examples of meritocratic elite capture globally and specifically in Pakistan.

Educational attainment, specifically higher education, is widely recognized as the main scale of merit. The success rate of landing a good job of an individual increases tenfold if he can score high grades, has better communication skills, and holds a degree from a prestigious university. The top-notch institutes of Oxford, Cambridge, The Ivy League, Harvard Business School, and Gao Kao of nations like the US, UK, and China are heavily criticized not only because of their competitiveness but also because they are saturated by the ones belonging to the top 1% of the income distribution (Chetty et al., 2023). The major reason behind this is the easy accessibility to high schools and preparatory resources, which is easier for a student from an affluent background.

The educational sector's dilemma is more severe and grass-rooted in the case of Pakistan. The Annual Statistics of Education Report (ASER, 2023) highlighted the critical role played by parental income and wealth, gender, and rural vs urban location in getting quality access to education for children aged 5-16 years. The data showed a clear pattern of enrollment of 73% of children from the poorest quantile while 83% children were enrolled from the richest quantile. The assessment results of public versus private schools were also in favor of the private schools. The statistics from the Labour Force Survey 2020-21 and PSLM Survey, 2019-2020 show the lowest percentage share of females in total literacy rate i.e. 51.9%, Gross Enrollment Rate (GER), and Net Enrollment Rate (NER) led to the ranking of Pakistan as 145th out of 146 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index 2024, a decline from its 142nd position in 2023, highlighting growing challenges in achieving gender parity.

The Civil Services in Pakistan are also a gateway to the elite government positions having significant authoritative power. The data source of FPSC indicates that most students are from urban areas and prosperous backgrounds. A recent trend of increase in the applicants having professional degrees like engineering, MBBS, and others has been observed which can be attributed to the acquisition of a prestigious position, stable income, and power.

The political economy of Pakistan can be exemplified as a pyramid manifesting in public and private domain, with a minuscule elite monopolizing each domain thus limiting market competition and impeding the equitable distribution of wealth. The political landscape of Pakistan is marked by the concentration of political power in the hands of a few families like Bhutto and Sharif. Their political acumen, strong family ties, and advocates of people's rights have earned them the support of a large segment of the population despite their elite status. This leads to a dysfunctional democracy, securing only votes and maintaining power thus leading to the exclusion of ordinary citizens.

The implications of elite capture on an ordinary citizen are endless. The widening gap between the income level of rich and poor exacerbates the existing inequality creating a vicious cycle of poverty. The limited social mobility, skewed justice system and the lack of trust in institutional structures create social unrest specifically among youth leading to brain drain.

To address these issues, a comprehensive reformatory policy targeting relevant sectors of society needs to be implemented. Investments in public education, providing financial aids and scholarships can raise the quality of education promoting inclusivity. The implementation of progressive taxation can help in the redistribution of wealth which can be further utilized for the social welfare programs reducing inequalities. The recruitment process in public and private institutions should be strictly merit based should promote diversity. Strengthening institutional structures like the National Accountability Bureau (NAB) and taking active anti-corruption measures will also aid in the development of public trust.

The existence of a meritocratic elite is an integral part of society. However, efforts can be made to minimize the distortions caused by meritocratic elite capture. A reform policy aimed at ensuring transparency in governance, and accountability, and stimulating inclusivity by reducing the gender disparity gap is the time of need. A just and sustainable future relies on the quality of meritocracy, reflective of real talent rather than generational privilege. The nations will thrive based on such individual yet inclusive growth and contribute productively to society.

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