

# ELITE CAPTURE AND GOVERNANCE IN PAKISTAN: Unravelling Historical Patterns

Fida Muhammad Khan

Colonization has always played a pivotal role in explaining the discrepancies in wealth, prosperity, underdevelopment, governance inefficiencies, and the existence of extractive institutions in former colonies (Acemoglu et al., 2001; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2015; Arnold, 1986). A significant body of literature in post-colonial studies and governance suggests that the contemporary extractive institutional structures and governance challenges in former colonies trace their origins to colonial legacies. "Elite capture" frequently results in inequalities and skewed resource distribution and is often linked with colonial history. While there is some justification to this perspective, it occasionally overlooks the dynamics of power capture or maintenance by elites prior to the departure of colonizers.

In this piece, I discuss how elites had already consolidated power before the establishment of Pakistan, spearheaded by the prominent figures within the Muslim community.

Pakistan, like many other nations, has a colonial history. When the British departed, there was limited progress in institutional structuring for the newly-founded nation. Consequently, Pakistan grapples with governance challenges, elite capture, and disparities in wealth and outcomes to this day. While the colonial past undeniably shaped the post-partition institutional framework in Pakistan, another influential element is the preferences of the political elites, including the "founding fathers." Theory suggests that institutions, whether inclusive or extractive, are molded by the desires of the political power-holders (Acemoglu et al., 2005; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2015). The persistence of colonial laws in Pakistan, with minimal institutional

reform, underscores the unfortunate reality that political elites are reluctant to relinquish power. Any reform threatens their political dominance and, by extension, their economic clout.

The local elites, who inherited power from the colonizers (the metropolitan elites), were primarily fixated on preserving their economic and political interests. The extractive institutions that benefited the colonizers were also conducive for the newly empowered leaders, offering no incentive to instigate change.

## **PARTY MEMBERSHIP: PROFILING SOME LEADERS**

A closer examination of the leadership of the Muslim League and the Pakistan Movement reveals a pattern. The trailblazers of the two-nation theory and the push for a separate homeland predominantly consisted of Nawabs, Chaudries, and influential nobles from the Muslim community. As decolonization seemed increasingly imminent, the movement gained traction. However, this elite leadership, comprised mainly of Nawabs and the landed class, was more vested in preserving their political influence and economic prowess. They were apprehensive about maintaining their dominion in a united India (Fremont & Ayesha, 1989; Sayeed, 1987; Talbot, 1986). Yet, they deftly used religion to rally public support.

Scrutinizing the profiles of the Pakistan Movement's leaders, a recurring theme emerges: most were influential landlords, boasting titles like Nawab, Chieftain, or Sardar. They hardly represented the average Indian

Muslim. Rather, they were emblematic of the subcontinent's elite, either bestowed with honors by the Mughals and subsequently favored by the British or explicitly recognized by the Raj for their allegiance. Notable figures like Nawab Muhsin ul Mulk, Nawab Viqar ul Mulk, Liaqat Ali Khan, and Chaudhry Rehmat Ali are prime examples. Even the founder, Jinnah, finds a place in this elite roster.

Educated in the West, many of these leaders were part of the British Civil Service. Muhsin-ul-Mulk, for instance, joined the Indian Civil Service and later served in the Nizam of Hyderabad's court. He also took on responsibilities at Aligarh (Azeem et al., 2017), an institution initially conceived for the Muslim elite. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, the founder of Aligarh, was not an advocate for universal Muslim education, especially for women. He believed not everyone had a right to education (Pakistan's Political History|Elite Class Hegemony & Two Nations Theory, 2022). Sir Syed's condescension towards the lower classes and his views on caste and class are well-documented in the literature about the Pakistan movement. However, this narrative seldom finds its way into textbooks.

It is essential for the viceroy's council to have members of high social standing. Would our aristocracy like, that a man of low caste or insignificant origin, though he may be a B A or an M A, and have the requisite ability, be placed in a position of authority above them and have the power of making laws that affect their lives and property.

### Alavi, 2002

Comments of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan on who is eligible for viceroy's legislative council quoted in (Alavi, 2002)

Being an elite and a successful bureaucrat of British colonial India, Sir Syed did not resonate with the masses. He shared the British perspective of the Indian populace: inefficient and inadequate. For instance, while discussing his changing views about the Aligarh school, he reportedly remarked on the perceived incompetency of Muslims in India (Wright, 1964). The Aligarh school, later under his guardianship, primarily catered to the Muslim elite's progeny.

Another distinguished leader of the Pakistan movement, Nawab Viqar ul Mulk, was at the helm when Nawab Salimullah of Bengal summoned a Muslim

conference. According to Alvi, the group of Nawabs led by Viqar ul Mulk successfully monopolized the pivotal roles in the party (Alavi, 2002). The Muslim elites consisted mainly of landed British loyalists, Ulemas affected by the Raj's changes, and those desiring influential positions in the British Indian government. The League predominantly represented this narrow subset of Muslim elites. The broader Muslim masses didn't factor into their political calculus until grassroots support became essential.

Liaqat Ali Khan, another formidable leader of the Muslim League, hailed from an affluent, influential background (Kazmi, 2003). Notably, Khan's family received patronage from the British East India Company, further bolstering their stature. Like many other League leaders associated with or educated at Aligarh College, Khan was an Aligarh alumnus. The British government continued its support even after Khan's father's demise, offering him a scholarship to study at Oxford (Lentz, 2014). This perhaps explains Khan's pro-Western inclinations during the Cold War. This narrative further solidifies Alavi's (2002) argument that the Muslim League's leadership primarily catered to a minority of Muslim elites instead of the broader Muslim population. Hence, it's plausible to argue that there wasn't a significant rift between Western interests and those of the Muslim elites.

Figure: Jinnahs Ride the Rolls Royce Roadster- a car custom made for Royalty



Concluding this section on the Muslim League's leadership profile, I focus on Muhammad Ali Jinnah. Born into affluence, Jinnah came from a prosperous merchant family (Desai, 2006). Though a Gujarati by ethnicity, he lacked proficiency in the language and was more fluent in English. During his association with the Congress, he resisted Gandhi's insistence on speeches in Gujarati for a campaign in Gujarat (Kazimi, 2018). Several studies have commented on Jinnah's fluency in English (Ghosh, 1999; I. H. Malik, 2006; Swamy, 1997).

Language choice indicates identification, reflecting one's social structure, upbringing, and political and personal beliefs. Given Jinnah's fluency and comfort with English and his elite origins, it's evident that he was part of the Muslim elite. This acknowledgment doesn't diminish Jinnah's leadership, but rather underscores that India's elite saw themselves as such, with English serving as one marker of that identity.

It's ironic that such a Westernized figure as Jinnah would lead a movement grounded in religion, especially when he appeared more Western than Indian. Nevertheless, he and his contemporaries hailed from the Muslim elite and were entrusted with leading the League. Even before joining the League, Jinnah, like some moderate Congress members such as Gopal Krishna (Singh, 2009), advocated for electoral reforms and increased Indian representation in government. Sadly, Pakistan's educational curricula tend to portray Congress as a "Hindu" party and the Muslim League as its "Muslim" counterpart. However, the League did not favor democracy because its leaders knew they couldn't secure seats or compete with the Congress due to the Muslim minority status. These elites, representing the Muslim League, opposed Congress leaders like Lala Lajpat Rai (Wolpert, 1984) who advocated complete independence.

Concerning Jinnah's economic status, he hailed from a financially stable family. He pursued his education in the UK and joined the Lincoln Inn. Jinnah was the only Muslim barrister in Bombay, politely declining a monthly offer of 1500 rupees by expressing his intent to earn this amount daily. His biographers claim that he eventually achieved this goal (Pirzada, 2007). Such an income level indicates a particular class and social standing. Although Jinnah lacked titles like "Nawab" or "Nawabzada," his wealth was undeniable. He donated substantial sums to educational institutions like Islamia College Peshawar, benefiting them to this day. This philanthropy was only feasible due to his extensive wealth, combined with his legal expertise, qualifying him to lead the Muslim League's campaign. In summary, an examination of the Muslim League's leadership underscores that the movement was primarily led by elites, aimed at safeguarding the interests of the Muslim elite. It was not a movement representing the entirety of India or the entire Indian Muslim community but rather a limited segment of elites who patronized the Muslim League.

## THE IDEOLOGY OF THE MUSLIM LEAGUE

The debate over whether Pakistan was a secular or ideologically Islamic country has fueled controversy. Progressives argue for a secular Pakistan, envisioning a harmonious coexistence of religious minorities alongside the Muslim majority. Conversely, conservative factions assert that Pakistan was founded as an Islamic state. Both sides present compelling arguments, but historical interpretation tends to be subjective, shaping the narrative.

One perspective cites Jinnah's speeches about the freedom to practice different religions as evidence of Pakistan's secular foundation. Advocates for this viewpoint maintain that Jinnah's motivation was to create a safe haven for religious minorities in a predominantly Hindu India. For instance, (Ahmar, 2012) dismisses the idea of a theocratic state and endorses a secular Pakistan. Stephen P. Cohen's criticism of the inclusion of Islamic principles in the constitution supports this argument.

Other prominent studies stress that the Pakistan Movement wasn't inherently religious. Scholars such as (Alavi, 2002; Bilgrami, 1985; Hasan, 1990; Hoodbhoy, 2007) adopt a more balanced and objective approach to understanding the leaders' ideological motivations. Rather than making sweeping claims, they acknowledge the ambiguity surrounding Pakistan's identity. Alavi (2002), for example, characterizes the movement as secular, driven by Muslim elites in the minority. Hoodbhoy (2007) notes the movement's diversity, comprising Sardars, Nawabs, Pirs, and religious clerics. Jinnah, to garner support, emphasized the movement as an Islamic one on some occasions and supported a secular state on others.

This ideological ambiguity can be attributed to Jinnah's pragmatism. He utilized religion when expedient and embraced a secular stance when necessary. However, one aspect where scholarship converges is the fact that the Muslim League was founded and led by Muslim elites, rather than representing the broader Indian population.

(Hasan, 1990) argues that it wasn't the two-nation theory that led to Pakistan's creation but a confluence of events that provided an opportunity for Muslim elites to establish a state. This state, along with its leaders, enjoyed support from the British Raj (N. S. Malik, 2012).

Delineating the precise ideological position of the Muslim League is challenging. Yet, its leadership was pragmatic, adapting to circumstances. For instance, the League did not support the Khilafat Movement, despite Gandhi's involvement. It also diverged from the Congress on the issue of land reforms. Scholars like (Hoodbhoy, 2007) and (Alavi, 2002) offer more accurate assessments. Hoodbhoy highlights the ambiguity in Jinnah's statements, while Alavi posits that the movement was secular, driven by Muslim elites safeguarding their interests and hegemony. Thus, the Pakistan Movement commenced when these elites saw an opportunity.

Religion was later employed as a tool by the elites to rally support. They marketed it as a struggle for an Islamic state, despite the Westernized leanings of the leadership. Notably, respected Muslim scholars like Hussain Ahmed Madani and Abdul Kalam Azad opposed Pakistan's creation.

In summary, the Muslim League, predominantly led by Muslim elites, remains shrouded in ideological ambiguity. The leadership pragmatically employed religion as a mobilization tool, while scholarship emphasizes the elite capture of the movement's leadership.

## CONCLUSION

This analysis underscores that "elite capture" has long been ingrained in the country's DNA, existing in the subcontinent's society well before Pakistan's establishment. It wasn't a post-independence tragedy but a pre-existing societal phenomenon. Elites across societies capture and retain power to protect their economic interests. This phenomenon is not unique to Pakistan; it's ubiquitous.

However, Pakistan tends to overlook this history, leading to misidentification of problems. Unemployment, poverty, low exports, lack of small-scale industries, deteriorating public education, and high external debt are not the root causes of underdevelopment but rather the effects of bad governance—a consequence of elite capture of politics and economics. This has deep historical roots in Pakistan.

Recognizing this reality is imperative to identify Pakistan's real challenges. Only then can the country embark on meaningful societal reforms.

*The author is a Lecturer at the PIDE School of Social Sciences.*

## REFERENCES

- Acemoglu, D., Johnson, S., & Robinson, J. A. (2001). The Colonial Origins of Comparative Development: An Empirical Investigation. *American Economic Review*, 91(5), 1369–1401. <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.91.5.1369>
- Acemoglu, D., Johnson, S., & Robinson, J. A. (2005). Chapter 6 Institutions as a Fundamental Cause of Long-Run Growth. In P. Aghion & S. N. Durlauf (Eds.), *Handbook of Economic Growth* (Vol. I, pp. 385–472). Elsevier. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1574-0684\(05\)01006-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1574-0684(05)01006-3)
- Acemoglu, D., & Robinson, J. A. (2015). Political institutions and comparative development. *NBER Reporter*, 2, 10.
- Ahmar, M. (2012). Vision for a Secular Pakistan? *Strategic Analysis*, 36(2), 217–228.
- Alavi, H. (2002). Social Forces and Ideology in the Making of Pakistan. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37(51), 5119–5124. JSTOR.
- Arnold, D. (1986). Police power and colonial rule, Madras, 1859-1947. (No Title).
- Azeem, M., Awan, M. A., & Mushtaq, A. Q. (2017). The man who did not let to dim the candle of Aligarh Movement: Nawab Mohsin-ul-Mulk. *Journal of the Punjab University Historical Society*, 30(1), 129–146.
- Banerjee, A. C. (1981). Two nations: The philosophy of Muslim nationalism. Concept Publishing Company.
- Bilgrami, A. (1985). Jinnah. Grand Street, 191–205.
- Desai, A. H. (2006). *India Guide Gujarat*. India Guide Publications.
- Fremont, G., & Ayesha, J. (1989). The Sole Spokesman Jinnah. The Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan. *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 22, 177. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3769295>
- Ghosh, P. S. (1999). BJP and the evolution of Hindu nationalism: From periphery to centre. Manohar.
- Hasan, M. (1990). Adjustment and accommodation: Indian Muslims after partition. *Social Scientist*, 48–65.
- Hoodbhoy, P. (2007). Jinnah and the Islamic state: Setting the record straight. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 3300–3303.
- Kazimi, M. R. (2018). Mohammad Ali Jinnah: His Vision and Legacy. *Pakistan Perspectives*, 23(2), 5–10.
- Kazmi, M. R. (2003). Liaqat Ali Khan, his life and works.
- Lentz, H. M. (2014). *Heads of states and governments since 1945*. Routledge.
- Malik, I. H. (2006). *Culture and customs of Pakistan*. Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Malik, N. S. (2012). Formation of the All India Muslim League and Its Response to Some Foreign Issues-1906-1911. *Journal of Political Studies*, 19(2), 169.
- Pakistan's Political History | Elite Class Hegemony & Two Nations Theory. (2022, September). [You tube video]. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y9F\\_YepyOUU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y9F_YepyOUU)
- Pirzada, S. S. (2007). Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah as a Lawyer. *Pakistan Journal of History & Culture*, 28(1).
- Qasmi, A. U. (2010). God's Kingdom on Earth? Politics of Islam in Pakistan, 1947–1969. *Modern Asian Studies*, 44(6), 1197–1253.
- Sayeed, K. B. (1987). The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League, and the Demand for Pakistan. By Ayesha Jalal. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. xiii, 310 pp. Maps, Bibliography. N.p. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 46(3), 683–685. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2056947>
- Singh, J. (2009). Jinnah: India, partition, independence. Rupa & Company.
- Swamy, K. R. N. (1997). Mughals, maharajas, and the Mahatma. (No Title).
- Talbot, L. (1986). Book Reviews: The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan by Ayesha Jalal. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985. 310pp. Price: £27.50. *South Asia Research*, 6(2), 195–195. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026272808600600207>
- Wolpert, S. (1984). *Jinnah of Pakistan*. Oxford University Press New York.
- Wright, T. P. (1964). Muslim Legislators in India: Profile of a Minority Élite. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 23(2), 253–267. Cambridge Core. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2050136>