



NO PRETENDING ABOUT POLITICS

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The proposition that Pakistan's myriad predicaments can be addressed through technocratic fixes is an old one. It has animated all three of the country's extended dictatorships, and has also frequently been deployed as a rhetorical weapon to undermine emaciated elected governments. Over the past few years, small democratic victories like the 18th constitutional amendment have been regularly pilloried by those who argue that federating units lack the technical know-how to manage the affairs hastily devolved to them in 2010.

There is certainly merit to the argument that Pakistan needs competent individuals to people its administrative apparatuses. But our history confirms, time and again, that there is nothing apolitical about the decision-making of military dictators, judges, the high bureaucracy and 'big men' electables. It is also as much of a truism that 'technocrats' inducted into government in the name of designing and executing 'good policy' supposedly unhindered by political considerations ultimately bow before the overlords who appoint them to positions of authority.

At a higher level of abstraction it is imperative to note that what the liberal mainstream and contemporary populists such as Imran Khan decry as 'corruption' is, in fact, a deeply ingrained logic of practice which technocrats cannot 'fix' through even the best designed policy interventions, let alone magically wish away through hollow sloganeering. Who one knows and how well-placed these connections are is the stuff of everyday politics and popular culture – and explains the operation of the state's administrative apparatuses in ways that are generally underspecified in both journalistic and scholarly circles.

Our fundamental challenge, then, is to displace this deep-seated structural logic of political patronage – or what I have termed the politics of common sense – by political imaginaries and practices that acknowledge and then redress deep-seated class, ethnic-national, gender and religious cleavages in Pakistani state and society.

To reiterate, the argument for ‘depoliticising’ Pakistan’s institutions misses the wood for the trees insofar as decision-making and resource allocation are essentially political matters. It is disingenuous to continuously call for apolitical technocracy given that virtually all technocratic experiments in our history have reinforced entrenched political-economic interests.

Perhaps the most fallacious example of technocratic ‘fixes’ in the current conjuncture is that of donor-shaped (pun intended) macroeconomic policy. Every Pakistani government over the past three and a half decades has adopted virtually the same set of policy conditionalities so as to secure loans from multilateral institutions like the IMF. Yet on each occasion, the latter – with our very own technocrats chiming in – decry that we have not taken the ‘reform’ process far enough. But even cursory inspection confirms that the rich get richer, public services continue to be repealed, ecologically destructive forms of capital accumulation intensify, and regional/ethnic inequalities are exacerbated – all of which is to say that the political is repeatedly and deliberately separated from the economy in the name of ‘technocratic expertise’.

Of course even the liberal mainstream is now being forced to acknowledge that Pakistan is subject to ‘elite capture’. But there is still an ostrich-like tendency to spare some political-economic interests from any criticism for the carnage against working people and the natural environment, most notably the donor community. The IMF, for example, is repeatedly exonerated from responsibility for imposing austerity, with many liberal commentators insisting that it is Pakistan’s domestic ‘elite’ that is solely to blame for the suffering of the proverbial poor.

But this is to ignore how Pakistan’s domestic political economy is intricately tied to the capitalist world-system, whether one is considering the long *durée* or the specific conjuncture of neoliberal globalisation. The latter period has featured the IMF and other proponents of the ‘Washington Consensus’ prying open Pakistan’s economy to globalised capital in the name of ‘free markets’.

The international financial institutions (IFIs) have colluded with Pakistan’s propertied classes to subject teeming millions to ever more suffocating austerity in the name of eliminating ‘market distortions’ so as to ensure that creditors are always paid back their debts, just like has happened across much of postcolonial Latin America, Asia and Africa. Most gallingly, the IFIs claim to be committed to the interests of the poor, rhetoric which is uncritically regurgitated by ‘technocrats’ in the form of old, tired slogans about economic ‘reform’².

Both orthodox economics as an academic discipline as well as the entire ‘international development’ industry can be expected to continue treating the political and economic as entirely separate domains, so that ‘technocrats’ who actually represent the political-economic interests of creditors, investors and big business are able to pose as dispassionate experts who purportedly seek to protect the public interest.

As David Harvey notes very succinctly, neoliberalism in theory (apolitical, ‘free’ markets) is very different from neoliberalisation in practice (highly politicised, ‘unfree’ markets).³ It is in part by exploding this binary that coherent political projects of and from working people and historically oppressed peripheral regions have come to the fore to challenge neoliberal intellectual and political orthodoxies over the past two decades, most notably in Latin America.

The challenge for us in Pakistan is to learn from relatively successful experiences in other parts of the postcolonial world and attempt to bring together class, ecological, ethnic-national and feminist movements to foment an alternative, pro-people politics. Competent young intellectuals are certainly important to this cause, as was made clear by Frantz Fanon many decades ago, during the conjuncture of decolonisation. Even as the ‘national bourgeoisie’ was betraying the cause of national liberation, Fanon retained hope in the ‘small number of honest intellectuals, who have no very precise ideas about politics, but who instinctively distrust the race for positions and pensions which is symptomatic of the early days of independence’.⁴ Today’s putatively ‘honest intellectuals’ are those young political subjects for whom the ideological props of state, capital and patriarchy have been demystified and the attendant ‘race for positions and pensions’ displaced. By transcending the intellectual hegemony that dresses up politics in the garb of apolitical expertise, these ‘honest intellectuals’ can carry forth the project of decolonisation to its logical conclusion.

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¹Aasim Sajjad Akhtar. *The Politics of Common Sense: State, Society and Culture in Pakistan* (Cambridge, 2018).

²<https://www.dawn.com/news/1738112/tax-the-rich-subsidise-the-poor-imf-asks-pakistan>

³David Harvey. *A brief history of neoliberalism* (Oxford, 2005).

⁴Frantz Fanon. *The wretched of the earth* (McGibbon and Kee, 1965)