

A photograph showing a man and a young boy on a bamboo raft in a flooded area. The man is standing on the left, leaning forward, and the boy is sitting on the right. The water is murky brown, and there are some buildings and trees in the background.

CLIMATE CATASTROPHES AND THE GLOBAL POLITICAL ECONOMY OF MALGOVERNANCE

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Climate change-induced flooding through much of Pakistan has recently raised questions about climate justice at the international scale. Europe, North America and East Asia are overwhelmingly responsible for the greenhouse gas emissions that are driving climate change. That said, governance failures in Pakistan have exacerbated the impact of droughts, floods, and other disasters. The rural landless, sharecropping tenants, small farmers, and middle classes have been disproportionately impacted because of their pre-existing marginalization. So, what does climate justice look like?

Although governance failures in Pakistan are often attributed to local ruling classes ('elite capture') it is important to understand that local governance failures have been and continue to be coproduced by international ruling classes. In other words, climate justice is not just about financial culpability for emissions, but also about culpability for existing relations of power that produce malgovernance.

Governance refers the process of making decisions and the process of implementing them, once made. But governance in Pakistan is quite literally coproduced by local and international actors. A cursory glance of water management literature in Pakistan demonstrates how deeply it is shaped by advice and 'assistance' from international financial institutions like the World Bank, whose agenda is often driven by US geopolitical and economic interests, as anthropologist Maira Hayat has recently laid out in a Washington Post op-ed. Our bureaucrats want large dams, and, as Kate Mackenzie has noted, the World Bank finances large dams because it is easier to make the case for profitability to its investors. Their interests, in other words, correspond.

Meanwhile, governance failures entail making bad decisions and implementing them, or not implementing good decisions. We could point to any number of internationally financed projects that have yielded little, if any, long-term results. Samia Waheed Altaf in her book *So Much Aid, So Little Development* describes how the Government of

Pakistan and the World Bank came up with the \$8 billion Social Action Program in the 1990s to increase access to all kinds of services, but the program failed. As she notes, international financial institutions are driven to push loans and grants onto developing countries, and in the latter bureaucrats and consultants sign on to (often short-term) projects to reap financial and other benefits. Little attention is paid to building institutions and human capacity, and to sustaining such capacity by finding longer-term sources of funding.

Most importantly, the design of programs often ignores the social context in which interventions are to be made. Failure, Altaf notes, is integral to the design. Indeed, ignoring this social context—by local and international powerholders—should strike us not as a mistake, but as deliberate. To understand this we need to grasp a deeper political economy of governance that moves beyond the concept of governance failure to understand malgovernance as a consequence of coproduced power relations.

In April of 2022, I spoke to tenants and activists in the Sindh districts of Mirpurkhas, Sanghar, and Nawabshah about rural conditions. In some cases, tenants described doing begar (unpaid labour) for landowners. In other cases, long-term tenants described landlords illegally evicting them from lands and homesteads, and then using extreme violence—including burning the homesteads and firing—to deny possession. In other cases, tenants described landlords preventing them from openly supporting other political parties in the villages.

This may seem like the failure of ‘rule of law’ and of governance, but it may be more useful to think about the despotic power of landowners in many parts of rural Pakistan as an alternative form of governance, with its own sets of clearly delineated norms, expectations, and rules. In other words, these are informal institutions. These informal institutions are ultimately based on structural relations of power—structured by people’s relationships to means of production like land and capital. In many parts of Sindh, tenants are bonded to landlords because of debt and living in homesteads on landlord property, hence landlords exercise direct power over them. The greater wealth of landlords enables them to finance other informal institutions—enforced

by hired thugs—and to exercise greater influence in and over the formal institutions, which in turn reinforces informal institutions. The point is not that government officials ought to be accountable to an abstract ‘law’—they have to be accountable to real social powers in their surroundings, and the marginalized classes, castes, and genders rarely have access to this kind of power as things stand. This results in malgovernance by both formal and informal institutions.

My research on peasant movements in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in the 1970s showed that when lower classes organized and asserted control over the lands, a *de facto* land and tenancy reform severely weakening landlords’ economic power, the latter’s political power also declined, especially at the local level. Landlords just could not enforce their despotic power and continue influencing formal institutions in the same way. Peasants could exercise their own forms of power and could impose relatively more accountability on governance.

I am hardly the only one who has pointed out that land reforms would be an important mechanism of improving local governance. But Pakistan’s landed elites have resisted every attempt at redistributive land reforms. Halting starts in 1958 and 1972 were arrested with the military coup of 1977 and all of it was capped by the Federal Shariat Court’s ruling against unremunerated land expropriation by the state in 1988. Pakistan’s international sponsors have supported landlords.

As Jo Guldi notes in her book *The Long Land War*, the United States began to withdraw its already ambivalent support for land reforms on the global level after the 1960s when its Indigenous, African American, and Latino minorities began demanding land reforms at the domestic level. In line with the broader turn toward market-oriented neoliberalism, the World Bank under Robert McNamara strongly supported large mechanized farming and falsely maligned smallholder farming as dangerous for food supply. The World Bank undermined, and declined to fund, the Food and Agriculture Organization’s support for land redistribution.

Since then, international financial institutions have largely ignored structural rural inequality in Pakistan. In 2002, renowned agrarian social scientists Kristoffer Lieten and Jan Breman consulted for the Asian Development Bank in rural Sindh, concluding that poverty alleviation would require land reform as a guiding principle. There was no follow up. In 2005, Nancy Birdsall, Adeel Malik and Milan Vaishnav prepared a report for the World Bank arguing that its programs abstract from power relations, and in rural areas ignore the need for land reforms. Although these institutions are ready to impose conditionalities costly for the poor, they are rarely interested in doing the same for Pakistan's wealthy.

So we return to Mirpurkhas, Sanghar, Nawabshah, Badin, and elsewhere in Sindh and southern Punjab, surrounded still in many cases by standing water. As floods hit, it was clear that provincial and district government officials had barely prepared themselves or the populations about to be inundated. On the spot, they were often absent, and when they appeared, inept. Contacts described the displaced staying on high roads or in schools, but there being variously no provision for water, rations, or medicines. Children are dying now from malaria for lack of antibiotics. Activists and social workers have had to raise relief funds and supplies on their own.

But in 2016, the World Bank approved a \$100 million loan to Sindh's provincial government for things like disaster preparedness, response and recovery, and risk reduction. Mostly this seems to have meant building dams to store water. But it is very unclear how all this activity helped prepare for or mitigate the impacts of these floods. Malgovernance is coproduced.

Environmental geographers have long noted how economic and political powerlessness exacerbates vulnerability in times of disaster. A food security crisis looms, not only because edible crops have been wiped out but because millions of rural landless depend on harvesting for their incomes. Tenant and small farmers who took loans to farm, their crops now inundated, will be even more indebted, giving even more power to landlords, microfinance institutions, and other powerholders. Even if financial resources come in to stem immediate emergencies, they will do little to prepare structurally for the droughts and floods that are sure to follow.

This malgovernance, though, is not just our own. It is coproduced by the economic and political interests that drive international financial institutions. Global climate justice therefore must entail not just transfer of resources from the Global North, but deep restructuring of political economic relations domestically and internationally. But as geographer Daanish Mustafa notes, we don't have time to wait for the Global North to develop a conscience. Pakistanis have to develop their own agenda of climate justice that will have to involve to equalizing land and asset distribution, making governance accountable, and asserting independence from the malgovernance of international powers.

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