

The political is all personal

Dr Muhammad Zeshan

The political economy of Pakistan is shaped by a complex interplay of formal rules and informal deals among elites. It has become important to explore the role of political connections, patronage networks, and informal agreements in Pakistan's political economy.

The use of political connections allows the elite to gain access to resources and influence decision-making in Pakistan, while patronage networks are used to maintain power and influence by exchanging favours and benefits. Informal agreements between elites can involve resource allocation or power sharing, and they are often enforced through personal relationships or other informal mechanisms.

Political connections are an important channel through which elites gain access to resources, develop rent-seeking behaviour, and influence decision-making. They can be defined as relationships that individuals or groups have with political parties, officials or other powerful actors that allow them to influence the political process and gain access to resources and opportunities.

The World Justice Project shows that Pakistan is ranked 116th out of 126 countries in terms of government accountability. A lack of transparency and accountability in government decision-making processes are the key factors contributing to this low ranking.

One way these connections are used is through the appointment of individuals to key positions in government and other institutions. Political parties often appoint individuals who are loyal to them to positions of power such as judges, bureaucrats, and other government officials. These individuals are often expected to advance the interests of the party and its supporters, which can include providing access to resources, jobs, and other benefits.

The Institute for Policy Reforms has found that around 70 per cent of key positions in the federal bureaucracy were held by individuals who were appointed based on their political connections, rather than their qualifications or experience.

Political connections are also used to influence decision-making. Elites with political connections use their influence to shape policies and regulations in ways that benefit them or their allies. This includes using their connections to secure contracts or licences for their businesses or to ensure that regulations are enforced in ways that do not harm their interests. According to the Pakistan Press Foundation, journalists and media outlets in the country often face pressure and intimidation from political actors and their supporters. This includes threats of violence or legal action, as well as

attempts to influence coverage through political connections and other means.

In addition to these more overt uses of political connections, they can also play a role in more subtle ways. For example, individuals with political connections may be able to use their influence to shape public opinion or media coverage in ways that benefit their interests. They may also be able to use their connections to gain access to information or intelligence that is not available to people.

Patronage networks are a powerful tool that elites use to maintain power and influence in Pakistan. A patronage network can be defined as a system of relationships based on the exchange of favours and benefits, where those in power provide resources and opportunities to their loyal supporters in return for their political loyalty and support.

These networks can take many forms, from informal networks of individuals who share political connections and loyalties to more formal systems of patronage that are institutionalized within political parties and other organizations.

One key way of using patronage networks in Pakistan is through the distribution of jobs, contracts, and other benefits to loyal supporters. This can involve giving preferential treatment to those who are affiliated with a particular political party or who have connections to powerful individuals. For example, government jobs may be reserved for individuals who are affiliated with the ruling party, or contracts for government projects may be awarded to companies that have close ties with government officials.

Another way is through the distribution of resources and services. Those with political connections may be able to access resources such as land, water, and electricity more easily than those without connections. They may also be able to access government services, such as healthcare and education, more easily than the general population.

Patronage networks can also be used to exert control over local communities and exert influence over elections. For example, political parties may provide resources and support to influential individuals in a particular community in exchange for their political support, or they may use their connections to intimidate or coerce voters.

Informal agreements between elites play a significant role in the political economy of Pakistan. The agreements take many forms, from simple handshakes and verbal agreements to more complex arrangements involving multiple parties and detailed terms and conditions. These agreements may be made in secret or behind closed doors, and they may involve the exchange of favours or other forms of *quid pro quo*.

One common type of these agreements is the allocation of resources. For example, elites may agree to divide government contracts, land, or other resources among themselves, instead of allowing them to be allocated through formal channels such as auctions or competitive bidding processes. This can lead

to a concentration of resources in the hands of a few powerful individuals or groups, and can limit opportunities for others to access these resources.

Informal agreements also involve power sharing among elites. For example, political parties may agree to divide government positions among themselves, or to support each other's candidates in elections. This helps ensure that a particular group or a coalition of groups maintains control over key positions of power, and limits opportunities for others to participate in the political process.

The enforcement of such agreements often relies on personal relationships and other informal mechanisms. For example, if one party to an informal agreement fails to uphold their end of the bargain, the other parties may use their connections and influence to put pressure on them to comply. Alternatively, they may use informal sanctions such as shaming or exclusion from future agreements to deter non-compliance.

Hence, the effectiveness of formal rules in Pakistan is often limited by factors such as weak enforcement mechanisms and political influence. As a result, informal agreements and patronage networks continue to play a significant role in the country's political economy.

The writer is a research fellow at the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE).