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Elite Living on Borrowed Time

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The political, social and economic situation is fragile. The agenda for reform is large, and daunting. Despite the urgency for change there is frustration on the seemingly aimless drift of a nation, a population gripped by a heightened sense of insecurity and uncertainty about the future, a deeply divided, morally bankrupt and callous society struggling to overcome apparently insoluble political and social crises, awaiting disaster. It is difficult to put in words one's helplessness and despair.

So, what should one write about? The barbaric carnage in Peshawar, our leadership of men of straw of limited capabilities petrified of taking on religious extremists (including sectarian and jihadi outfits), kidnappings for ransom, daylight robberies, property qabzas, corruption, misappropriation of public funds, use of discretionary powers violating laws, rules and regulations, the widening gulf between the rich and the poor, etc. These factors have paralyzed State organs. No wonder many feel that the country's survival has been unduly compromised.

This State, fast becoming dysfunctional, is still hoping that the political and military-bureaucratic elites can mediate between different elite groups. The State is trying to operate a loose, uneasy coalition of the traditional landed elite, the business classes, the military-bureaucratic elite and the new breed of politicians—the latter are courtesy money made as construction contractors on government schemes following the upsurge in public sector activity from the late seventies to the 1990s; in several cases through bribes or connections with those in power. Some turned from rags to riches overnight from commissions earned as deal fixers in transactions involving public sector corporations and departments. Some seemingly appeared from nowhere whose affluence can only be explained by money acquired from illegal/criminal activities (trade in drugs, arms and ammunition and the black market for foreign currency), etc. or by the nexus they developed with the civil and military bureaucracy in getting government contracts, acquiring land for developing housing schemes, etc. Still others made money seizing opportunities in construction, trading, urban land speculation, smuggling of consumer goods, etc., created by the expansion in economic activity because of:

- the role played by the State, following the more liberal availability of aid during the Afghan war and post 9/11; and
- large inflows of foreign remittances through official channels and the 'hundi' market or from narco trade.

Under such an arrangement each group has to be accommodated. The expenditure on the extravagant privileges of the military and civil bureaucracy and the lavish life style of the 'rulers',

their 'gifts' of plots and 'licenses' to friends/supporters, the orgy of corruption, the protection of thugs and criminals by politicians, the monopolistic profiteering by the commercial groups sheltered from competition and their resistance to the widening of the tax net, the transferring of funds abroad through under invoicing of exports and over pricing of imports, etc., are all outcomes which have to be tolerated and accepted even when it is fully recognised that the maintenance of these privileges stand in the way of economic growth. The State is hostage to these interests and their perceptions on how Pakistan's political, bureaucratic and economic formations should be organized.

Society has also assimilated the political, social and cultural values of a structure rooted in paternalistic and personal relations (in contrast to impersonal and market relationships in most other countries), nepotism and patronage, violation of laws and non-acceptance of norms for contract adherence and for rewarding merit, etc.

Resultantly, abuse of power and corruption became institutionalized, morphing into an integral component of the administrative, social and political culture. With the institutionalization of corruption the income derived from bribes is now an expected part of wages for the bureaucracy and expected earnings for public representatives; adversely influencing social values and work ethics.

Despite the complaints of the citizenry about misuse of powers by politicians and bureaucrats expectations of favours in gaining an unfair advantage and in getting around the system go a long way in explaining why the disadvantaged vote for those they love to hate instead of someone who promises reforms. They have little hope that the system will ever function in accordance with the norms of civilized societies. That the elite will continue to work the system to their advantage, being too well entrenched to be dislodged by the electoral process. Therefore, instead of demanding the establishment of a fair and transparent system, they make the most they can from the opportunity provided by the electoral system. If you cannot beat them then, at least, attempt to join them and hope that some crumbs will fall in your lap. Therefore, not surprisingly the same 'families' continue to "grace" the assemblies.

However, the society's cultural, social and political values, the economy's resource mobilisation capacities and the institutions of governance can no longer contain or resolve these crises. The military bureaucratic elite are now finding it exceedingly difficult to perform their historical role of

mediation, especially with the regional question having acquired great importance. The unstable political structure is also being battered by the rising tide of ethnic and social conflicts.

The widening differential between the misery of the poor and the contentment of the rich is increasing polarisation in society, breeding social unrest. The soft options of the past (concessional aid, foreign remittances of overseas Pakistanis, the bounties that became available from fortuitous events like the Cold War, the Afghan war, 9/11etc;) that enabled the elite to postpone a fundamental restructuring of this crumbling State and associated political economic relationships, will most likely not be available with such ease and abundance in future. At least in theory, if not in practice at this juncture, time is up for the self-serving elite operating on a short time horizon to further enrich itself, simply unwilling to foster a system that gives the less privileged some stake through the creation of a fairer and more caring social order. To put a derailed society and economy back on track will require these dominant elites to bear much of the pains of adjustment.