[**Collapse of an elitist state**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1649022/collapse-of-an-elitist-state)

[Ishrat Husain](https://www.dawn.com/authors/274/ishrat-husain)Published September 29, 2021 - Updated a day ago

The writer is the author of Pakistan: The Economy of an Elitist State.

IN common parlance, an elitist state is one where the benefits of economic growth are disproportionately appropriated by a small sliver of the population at the expense of the majority and manifested in income, regional and gender inequalities. In contrast, the shared growth model raises the tide lifting all boats and the benefits are widely distributed.

The elite’s composition does vary with the passage of time but usually comprises groups that exercise or have access to the levers of power in a state ie political leaders, bureaucrats, military officers, large businesses, big farmers and top professionals. The empirical validation of this model was presented in my book Pakistan: The Economy of an Elitist State in 1999 (revised in 2019).

The ongoing popular discourse about the collapse of the Afghan state apparatus — the national unity government, provincial governors, the Afghan National Army, Afghan police etc — has rightly focused on the chaotic departure of the US forces and the peaceful takeover by the Taliban. It is legitimate to ask why, despite spending $2 trillion and building an army and police force at the cost of $89 billion, the US was forced to exit so unceremoniously. How come a superpower with its military might and economic prowess could not overcome a disorganised group of non-state actors?

**Read**: [*Afghan army collapse 'took us all by surprise': US defence secretary*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1648963/afghan-army-collapse-took-us-all-by-surprise-us-defence-secretary)

Various explanations ranging from Afghanistan being the ‘graveyard of superpowers’ to the ideological commitment of the Taliban to the poor strategic choices made by US presidents have occupied the debating space. While all these may be partially true this article propounds an alternative hypothesis ie it is an issue regarding the collapse of an elitist state artificially nurtured and pumped up by external stimuli. Once those stimuli were withdrawn the artificial superstructure found itself dismantled.

Why did soldiers and policemen surrender so easily to the Taliban?

In the case of Afghanistan, a new elite class was popped up by an artificial respiratory system and administered injections of huge doses of donor money. The country did not have the capacity to absorb roughly $100bn annually — five times its 2020 GDP (the 2001 GDP was only $4bn). A new class of contractors, suppliers, transporters, importers, experts, bankers and military commanders was added to the traditional elites such as warlords, government officials, clergy leaders, drug traffickers etc. The Taliban, as well as the US companies and intermediaries, also got a share of the US contract money for providing safe passage.

**Read**: [*US spent $290m every day in Afghanistan for 20 years*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1646289)

This enlarged elite class was the main beneficiary of the continued occupation of Afghanistan by external forces; incomes, rent-seeking opportunities, businesses, jobs and corruption swelled the elite’s wealth. Having transferred this wealth abroad they were the first ones to take flights out of Kabul helped by the US forces. SIGAR Report, Afghanistan Papers and Carnegie Fund reports have amply documented the leakages, misappropriations and capital flight. “For almost two decades now, billions of dollars in corruption proceeds have been funnelled from Afghanistan, a country devastated by four decades of conflicts, to Dubai. These outflows have played a part in stunting Afghanistan’s economic and political development, facilitating the resurgence of the Taliban and exacerbating regional instability.”

Compare this scenario with the plight of the common citizens of Afghanistan. Ninety per cent of the population lives below the poverty line without decent jobs, steady sources of livelihood, or access to basic public services. Donor money financed most of the schools and clinics but SIGAR found evidence of embezzlement and diversion of donor funds.

The question arises: why did the Taliban have such a walkover without any resistance by residents? Despite many weaknesses and transgressions committed by the Taliban in their earlier regime the ordinary Afghan had no trust in successive Afghan governments. They welcomed the Taliban not only because they were fed up with continuing violence and insecurity for the last four decades but also because they felt the Taliban would not indulge in the massive corruption rampant since 2001. Trust is the glue that keeps the population attached to the government of the day.

Successive governments were popularly seen as having been imposed by outsiders, taking orders from them, looking to them to resolve power disputes, and relying on them for economic sustenance. The army and police were recruited, trained, equipped and paid by the same outsiders not to protect the citizens or Afghanistan’s territorial integrity but as a counterinsurgency force. Almost all institutions of the state had become dysfunctional and the erosion of their capacity diverted the population’s attention and support towards the Taliban who could fill the vacuum.

*The Economist* reported in November 2020 that security actually improved in the areas the Taliban controlled. Local Taliban leaders solved most disputes and decisions were taken immediately and enforced. The Taliban leaders insisted that teachers actually turn up at work. “Boys at least can still get an education and the sick can receive healthcare in areas occupied by the Taliban.” It was this expectation of corruption-free good governance, expeditious and inexpensive justice and access to basic services that led residents to pave the way for the Taliban.

Women activists have rightly agitated against the serious risk of girls not going to schools or women not getting employment opportunities under the Taliban. While these concerns are genuine it must be admitted that except for the urban educated women and girls enrolled in urban areas the plight of the majority of Afghan women all these years has not improved. Life expectancy was 45 years and the incidence of deaths at the time of pregnancy and child birth was quite high.

Why did soldiers and policemen surrender so easily to the Taliban? A soldier won’t risk his life when he hasn’t been paid his salary for months, his family is on the brink of starvation and he knows that his commanders have amassed huge wealth by diverting his dues and that they don’t care about his welfare. A sense of uncertainty and demotivation prevailed because they knew their paymasters (the US) would no longer fund them. It was the survival instinct that overwhelmed them and resulted in their surrender.

The lesson from Afghanistan’s story is that misgovernance and corruption by elites at the expense of the majority’s welfare will cause popular disaffection and allow non-state actors to take over the reins of the state.

*The writer is the author of Pakistan: The Economy of an Elitist State.*

*Published in Dawn, September 29th, 2021*