**[Elite bias](https://www.dawn.com/news/1426737/elite-bias)**

[Usama Khilji](https://www.dawn.com/authors/7248/usama-khilji) August 13, 2018

The writer is director of Bolo Bhi, an advocacy forum for digital rights.

“DEMOCRACY cannot work in Pakistan until the masses are educated” is an arrogant remark one hears from several supposedly educated Pakistanis who, as shown by their perceptions of the intelligence of our ‘illiterate masses’, are distant from reality.

Democracy as a system has several flaws the world over, including in Pakistan. The role of capital in enabling candidates to be successful in polls, the pressure and meddling by powerful state institutions, and nepotism through dynastic politics — all impact the sanctity of the voice and wishes of the people.

However, there are several strong movements that prove it is possible to have people’s voices heard in governance despite obst­ruc­tions. For instance, two members of the Awami Workers Party hailing from Islam­abad’s katchi abadis were successful in the 2015 local bodies elections after an entire community was forcibly and inhumanely evicted by the Capital Development Autho­rity, something the Supreme Court has now forbidden them from doing until alternate housing arrangements are made for the poor.

More recently, two main leaders of the Pakhtun Tahaffuz Movement, Mohsin Dawar and Ali Wazir, got elected as independent candidates to the National Assembly from North Waziristan and South Waziristan, respectively.

*Voting is a right, not a privilege.*

The assumption that for democracy to function in Pakistan, all voters need to be literate is deeply flawed for several reasons.

We must understand that government impacts each citizen regardless of her or his level of education. In fact, the underprivileged, which make up most of the illiterate population in Pakistan, depend more on the government for service delivery than the privileged elite who are able to pave roads for themselves, instal generators, and afford private education. Hence, the vote of the underprivileged and illiterate population potentially holds deeper meaning and is perceived as a strong weapon that enables each citizen regardless of her or his background the agency to demand accountability under the social contract between government and citizens.

The elite bias also functions on the basis that an illiterate citizen lacks intelligence and rationality. This is simply untrue, and reeks of arrogance, as — needless to say — literacy in no way is a definite or exclusive path to rational thinking and political acumen. An illiterate person also cares for their own self and a family, is in need of public facilities, utilises infrastructure, and bases the choice of vote rationally on delivery of these requirements.

The public messaging of political parties has an impact, but as the July 2018 elections show, voters often choose young, dedicated political workers over established feudal families, such as Zartaj Gul Wazir who defeated Awais Ahmed Khan Leghari by a margin of over 25,000 votes. This demonstrates how voters, whether literate or not, exercise their agency in choosing candidates despite traditional patronage structures.

It is also important to realise the structural advantage as well as exploitation that large sections of the educated elite benefit from at the expense of illiterate citizens that many of them often ignorantly deride. The elite conveniently profit from the labour of tenant farmers on agricultural land, and factory workers in industries; and live comfortably due to the labour of domestic workers which often extends up to 20 hours in many cases. These workers are often paid below minimum wage, and usually much less than the living wage required to survive today’s inflation rates.

The same mentality extends to offers of free food to the poor to encourage voting. Luckily for the poor, voting is entirely private, so accountability for the plates of food that are only served before elections does not always achieve its objective.

Instead of making efforts to educate disadvantaged children, sections of the elite benefit from their labour in the comfort of their homes. Photographs of child workers sitting in isolation at restaurants and watching their employers eat go viral on social media every few months. The torture of a child domestic worker, Tayyaba, at the hands of an Islamabad judge’s wife is not an isolated example.

The fight for universal suffrage in history has been a difficult one, and we are still a long way from benefiting from the participation of all citizens in the democratic process for governance to be representative of the needs of the people, but as several electoral upsets have shown, we are getting there. Voting in no way is a privilege but must always remain a fundamental right accorded to every citizen without violating its sanctity.

It is high time we dismantle the elitist mentality that manifests itself in the ‘no maids and servants beyond this point’ signs at elite clubs in Pakistan and ensure the equal treatment of all citizens as promised by Article 25.

*The writer is director of Bolo Bhi, an advocacy forum for digital rights.*

[**usama@bolobhi.org**](http://mailto:usama@bolobhi.org/)

**Twitter:** [**@UsamaKhilji**](https://twitter.com/UsamaKhilji)

[**www.usamakhilji.com**](http://www.usamakhilji.com/)

*Published in Dawn, August 13th, 2018*

[Facebook Count27](https://www.facebook.com/sharer/sharer.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.dawn.com%2Fnews%2F1426737&display=popup&ref=plugin)

[Twitter Share](https://twitter.com/share?text=Elite%20bias%0A&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.dawn.com%2Fnews%2F1426737&counturl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.dawn.com%2Fnews%2F1426737)