**[Trampling on merit](https://www.dawn.com/news/1718517/trampling-on-merit)**

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LITERATURE shines in the hands of a maestro when it narrates timeless facts. In the following passage what Tolstoy wrote about a Russian czar eons ago sounds true even today for some of our leaders: “Continual brazen flattery from everybody round him in the teeth of obvious facts had brought him to such a state that he no longer saw his own inconsistencies or measured his actions and words by reality, logic, or even simple common sense; but was quite convinced that all his orders, however senseless, unjust, and mutually contradictory they might be, became reasonable, just, and mutually accordant simply because he gave them.”

Some of our leaders, and their coterie, believe what they say is just and right simply because they say it. With this brazenness, they appoint people to key posts or fire them from there. And this is actually quite sad.

Whoever wants friendship and family relations to determine the distribution of state resources doesn’t want to end injustice, hunger, poverty, disease, or illiteracy; that person can’t be a friend to the state. The never-ending frenzy of using power to be true to one’s self but not to one’s country, to crush merit and advance nepotism, shatters millions of dreams even after seven decades of the country’s existence — is this not tyranny?

**Read:** [*Merit and mediocrity*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1212061)

On tyranny, Shaikh Sa’adi narrated a fable. King Noshirvan the Just needed some salt for roasting his prey. A man was sent to the village to get some. “Pay for the salt,” said Noshirvan, “lest taking it become a custom and the village be ruined.” Seemingly minor wrongs eventually can ruin states.

To crush merit and advance nepotism is to shatter millions of dreams

For decades our powerful elite have derived pleasure from a major wrong; they have been trampling on merit. The seeds sowed by this will not yield roses, the outcome can be dangerous.

When you trample on merit you create an air of difficulty. Asking a heart surgeon to tailor a fine dress and tailor to fix a human heart will not only be bizarre but useless in the first case and criminal in the second.

A person with no track record of solving really complex problems and without appreciation for scrupulousness and honesty doesn’t deserve a crucial job on which millions of lives depend. If we let such a person rule a province or a ministry then wouldn’t he pierce through millions of hearts and millions of dreams in just one stroke? And when that happens wouldn’t that be contempt of the ballot? If this isn’t contempt of the trust of millions of people then I don’t understand the meaning of the word ‘contempt’.

**Read:** [*The worst of worlds*](https://www.dawn.com/news/1600310)

No institution, no province and no city can ever thrive if it is headed by the wrong people. Incompetent people don’t have the capacity to make decisions that can pull a wobbly nation like ours out of a whirlpool of troubles. Maybe this is why our problems are compounded? Maybe this is why our leaders keep staring into the abyss while the abyss stares back at them?

The citadels of power should stand shaken when merit and justice are thrown to the wind. No merit and no justice can be cultivated within any sphere of political chicanery.

Now a word about the role of kinship in power circles.

According to Joseph Henrich, a professor at Harvard University, in his book titled The WEIRDest People in the World: “intensive kinship norms regulate people’s behaviour in subtle and powerful ways.” And that to “navigate such environments one has to favour conformity to peers, deference to traditional authorities, sensitivity to shame, and an orientation towards the collective (eg, clan) over oneself.”

Today, we need leaders that do the opposite of the above. We need people in powerful positions to not conform to illogical peers, to not defer to unbridled authority, and to not orient towards a benevolent clan over themselves or their troubled nation.

It is sometimes instructive to look elsewhere for inspiration. Now in any good institution in the world, scarcely do you see friendship and family taking priority over the institution’s interest. Merit takes precedence.

As an example, one can look at modern tech companies. Some of these companies have created enough value that life without them doesn’t seem possible now. How are they run? One, Microsoft, founded by Bill Gates, has a market capitalisation of $1.57 trillion and a man, a stranger to Gates’ family, born and raised in India, named Satya Nadella, runs it. He didn’t earn this position just because he happened to be a son or friend of a powerful man.

**Read:** [*Nepotism, power-based influences abound, says Kiani*](https://www.dawn.com/news/185475/bureaucracy-is-disillusioned-nepotism-power-based-influences-abound-kiani)

Another tech giant Apple, with a market capitalisation of $2.2tr today, isn’t run by Steve Jobs’ friend or by his daughter or son.

To run a country and to run a company are two different things, yes. And everything these companies do can’t be looked at with admiration. But we also can’t deny their giant innovative leaps as well as the value they have created. We must reflect on why the founders of these companies, after years of toil, hand it over to someone who isn’t family or a friend. Because they know betraying merit will quickly sink their companies without a ripple.

Even in reasonably functional democracies, merit takes precedence. Rarely do you see a tribe or group of friends running a well-governed country where life, liberty, and property are secure.

To keep betraying merit or not to: for us that’s the question. Personal crises often make us realise how crucial merit is. If we fall sick, we try to find the best physician. And if the ruling elite fall sick, their search for the best physician goes beyond our borders. Why don’t the troubles of our country then make our leaders take the same view?

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