**Dynasticism and its discontents**

BY U M A I R J A V E D 2020-12-14

RECENT events have brought concerns around dynasticism in Pakistan`s electoral politics to the fore once again. In reviewing the issue`s causes and consequences, it is important to consider both dynasticleadership succession and localcandidate selection. As research by Hassan Javid, Farooq Naseer, and Ali Cheema has shown for the case of Punjab, dynastic candidates ie those who followed a relative in politics accounted for approximately two-thirds of the elected legislators and around half of the top three contestants in National Assembly elections in the province between 1985 and 2008. This is coupled with the fact that the share of dynastic politicians in the Assembly has remained relatively stable during this period.  
  
The high and continuous prevalence of a dynastic logic in politics makes it hard to ascertain that it flows from the proverbial top, le lower tiers are replicating the practice of dynastic leadership succession in political parties; or whether the widely prevalent practice of promoting close relatives to tal(e your place in electoral politics ultimately gets reflected in leadership transitions as well. The causes now appear to be mutually reinforcing regardless ofthe originalsin.  
  
Simultaneously, no matter how complicated the causes may be, making the theoretical case against dynastic politics is relatively easy. If we consider individual autonomy, equality of rights and opportunity, and the replacement of traditional authority with legal-rational authority to be worthy normative goals, dynastic succession stands in stark contrast to all three. History tells us that ordinary people have spent several centuries trying to change politics from being the preserve of the few, and revising their status from subjects to legal equals. If political parties accord privilege to familial ties in decision-making, they are essentially violating equality of status and opportunity.  
  
Some argue that electoral politics makes this case slightly complicated because ultimately dynastic politicians, unlike monarchs, are subjected to public validation/ invalidation through a one-person, one-vote test. If people prefer dynastic candidates by voting for them, as the data for Punjab superficially suggests, then is that not sufficiently democratic and even meritocratic (given that merit in politics is whoever can best win anelection)? The problem with this position is that it ignores supply-side inequality. Only some le relatives are given access to resources and influence that makes them eligible and successful as electoral candidates. Others who may have the potential of becoming great leaders, legislators, and policymakers may miss out simply because of the birth lottery.  
  
Occasionally, those coming through the principle of dynastic nomination and succession may be very good at something other than just winning an election. They may, for example, be good at policymaking or may be necessary in holding a party together locally or nationally as an institution. But this would be a probabilistic exception rather thana logically designated and purposeful outcome.  
  
Whatever way one cuts it, dynasticism is a sub-optimal phenomenon in principle.  
  
The problem is that all of this is relatively easy to state and agree with in principle. The issue, for those perturbed by it, is to find a solution. Dynastic nomination and succession is a de facto phenomenon. It is not written down as a legal condition in our statute books or a rule in the internal constitutions of political parties, so a ham-fisted dandadriven strategy (such as the degree condition superficially tried by Gen Musharraf in 2002) can`t work. It exists as an unwritten norm a script for understanding the world that guides actual behaviour.  
  
Challenging norms is harder because it requires getting some people, in this case, those in power, to change how they interpret the world around them.  
  
However, unless compelled by circumstances, why would you change a norm that largely works in your favour?The possibilities out of this situation are remote, but they exist along two trajectories. The first is mass cultural change on the demand side: voters refuse to vote for dynastic candidates as a matter of ideological principle, thus rendering the norm ineffective for the most important thing in politics winning an election. This may happen over a longer period of time as attitudes and motivation for voting change, but will likely be in fits and starts.  
  
The second is a shift within the realm of party politics itself, ie on the supply side. Imagine a situation where a party ideologically commits itself to some non-dynastic logic of candidate selection, such as a combination of party loyalty, experience, ideological clarity, grassroots work, ability to raise resources etc. Repeat cycles of enforcing this rule with some electoral success may slowly change norms and beliefs of what helps you win within the political sphere and resultantly leave the voters with high-potential, non-dynastic candidates to choose from.  
  
Anyone with even a cursory understanding of Pakistan`s politics knows that a shift via the supply side is nowhere on the horizon. Those parties benefiting from dynasticism in leadership transitions right now are obviously not going to do it. The other party theoretically best positioned to do it, the one that rhetorically champions a platform of meritocracy and breaking with damaging political traditions and whose core supporters lament dynasticism the most, has repeatedly reinforced dynasticism in its candidate selection practices. In turn, instead of upping the pressure on the leadership, some of its supporters are left with the unenviable task of rationalising it as a necessary evil, occasionally even citing it as a voter demand problem (rather than a party problem).  
  
Leaving aside the debate on whether changing this norm should even be a priority or not, whichever way one cuts it, there is no clear path out of this sub-optimal situation. One can either hope for long-term cultural change among voters or a nearmagical change in heart among parties to change their practices. Neither seem possible or plausible in the years ahead.  The writer teaches politics and sociology at Lums.  
  
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