Dynasties and cults

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| IN developed states, policies largely attract votes. In developing ones, electables gain vote banks by promising patronage goodies directly to local clans. These banks, being based on social links, transfer within families, which produces dynastic politics.  Patronage pyramids run from the local to national, linking local electables to national ones, often via family links. Parties have their own vote banks also. However, these too are mostly not based on their policies but on cultist hero worship of top leaders.  So, most parties win polls via a mix of top leaders` political dynasties and cults.  Political variances come from economic ones. Developed states produce high-end goods that require educated labour. Thus, merit prevails in economics and politics and individual progress mostly depend on what one knows. But developing states produce low-end goods where producers need merit less than personal loyalty. Here, patronage prevails in economics and polidcs and individual progress depends on whom one knows.  Sleaze emerges naturally in low-end economies not initially due to the greed of politicians and bureaucrats but the needs of economic agents to bypass onerous laws given low-profit margins and intense competition in most low-end sectors. Laws emerged slowly and organically in today`s developed states. But today`s developing states inorganically and rapidly adopt laws from developed states. Economic agents then offer sleaze to state ofñcials to bypass them; they oblige and use it to distribute patronage and get rich. Other forms of sleaze duly emerge.  Thus, developing states exhibit tight and complex politico-economic systems whose parts can`t be changed easily without risking a system collapse. Angry middle-class minds want a quick end to political dynasties and sleaze via ruthless accountability of politicians, naively believing this would give progress. In reality, their end may create economic and political chaos.  On one side, the needs of economic agents will go unmet, leading to economic chaos.  On the other, the patronage needs of electables and the masses will go unmet, producing political instability. This happens where overzealous anti-sleaze steps are unleashed thoughtlessly, eg Indian demonetisation and PTI accountability drives. The seductive idea that honest politicians can quickly introduce brilliant policies for rapid progress is not backed by global evidence.  Where honest top leaders have captured power, they have failed to ignite progress, as with the PTI today. States that have developed rapidly in recent years have done so not by ending sleaze and dynastic politicsfirst but despite them.  This lesson from political economy lenses only cautions against viewing anti-sleaze policies as major drivers of progress and not against tackling sleaze as a legal issue, which it basically is. But the lens of global legal norms too says accountability must involve strong due process, which means few politicos will be convicted. Thus, both political economy and legal lenses give the same insight, ie a quick end to corrupt dynastic politics is infeasible. So the brand of corrupt patronage politics of mostly poor illiterates at least has a narrow validity.  However, educated middle-class minds hate such politics and want a better one. But thenone seesthatvastsecdonsofsuchpeople lack even narrow validity. So they of ten join the political cults of charismatic `messiahs` like Altaf Hussain and now Imran Khan more broadly. Here, there is no focus on policies and competence, only on the claimed supernatural virtues of messiahs which are magically expected to directlyproduce progress.  Elsewhere, middle classes are even ardent fans of bigots. Other pearls of wisdom educated people share involve regime tinkering, eg presidentialism, proportionate representation and even technocracies and autocracies thoughthere is no proof these work. So shockingly, the politics of our rich and educated is much worse than even that of poor illiterates.  The brand that offers most hope but that few follow is the rights-based, leftist politics of fered by small parties like the Awami Workers Party. The poor don`t adopt it given their constraints. The educated don`t adopt it due to lack of political sense. So, in the short term at least, the most selling political brands in Pakistan will remain dynastic, cultist and bigoted politics.  Dynastic politics is the least odious. If one ends it artificially, the void will be filed by cultist, fascist and/or bigoted politics rather than high politics. Thus, one may detest the Bhuttos and Sharifs for their misrule and graft. But removing them artificially via rigged polls and trials will cause more misrule and political instability, as is true today.  The writer is a Fellow with UC Berkeley and heads INSPIRING Pakistan, a progressive policy unit.  murtazaniaz@yahoo.com Twitter: @NiazMurtaza2 |