**[More difficult now](https://www.dawn.com/news/1836170/more-difficult-now)**

[Dr Niaz Murtaza](https://www.dawn.com/authors/385/dr-niaz-murtaza) Published May 28, 2024

SUSTAINING hegemony over the masses has been a key aim and challenge for our elitist state. This exercise has caused endless political instability and insecurity, given the fightback by the people and the power tussles among elite ethnicities, classes and institutions.

The top gun position shifted often in the first decade: institutionally from the Muslim League to the bureaucracy, to the military; ethnically from Mohajirs to Punjabis; and from a mixed class clique to the middle class. The coordinates of raw power soon became conservative, older, male, military, elitist, Sunni, upper class and Punjab.

Since 1958, the unelected clique has kept its hegemony via close ties with global patrons, co-opting political and state elites, rigging politics and demolishing mass dissent, with religion and Kashmir as rallying narratives. It ruled unelected via large one-window but odious US aid: money, arms, veto cover, markets, technology, and multilateral loans. Linked to US security aims, it helped keep politicians out but caused violence too.

As US aid ebbed, it courted politicians to quell dissent and ruled covertly. The elected eras kept growing given the growing internal and external binds against autocracy. The first was from 1972 to 1977 with one (free) election. The second was from 1985 to 1999 with only one of five elections deemed fair (1988) and each assembly nixed early. The third is from 2002 to now, with two free elections (2008 and 2013) out of five. Four assemblies reached term but not the prime ministers, reflecting minor democratic gains. The early dismissals were due to civilian forays into what the establishment considered its own affairs, policy tiffs and claimed misrule. They were carried out via coups, no-trust votes, presidential powers, and forced exits. The mode and strength of covert rule varied, focusing on security and external policy from 2008-18 but more intrusively politics and economics as well after 2018, erasing all democratic gains. Both eras saw big tiffs with out-of-sync civilians, with Nawaz Sharif to the establishment’s left and Imran Khan to its right on the US, India, Taliban, etc.

State elements now face a unique challenge in sustaining their hegemony.

State elements now face a unique challenge in sustaining their hegemony. Cosy ties with the US are over and other powers (China and Saudi Arabia) can’t provide large, one-window aid. Arch-enemy India is now a global power and dwarfs our geo-economic powers. Global sanctions have cut the ability to deploy jihadis. State elements have partially lost their narrative as the custodians of national piety and patriotism as Imran Khan acts as a stauncher custodian. There are hostile extremist states on three sides matching our insurgencies in KP and Balochistan. The economy is unusually bad. Yet its residual powers are formidable — arms, agents, businesses — and keep all parties subservient.

The divorce with the PTI has created an elite middle-class alliance against older parties: middle-class parties (led by the PTI), media anchors, professional classes, expats and sections of the judiciary, bureaucracy, and reportedly even the ranks. Moreover, the insurgents are largely middle class. Smaller middle-class parties had existed for long, like religious ones and the MQM. But the advent of social media has aided the rise of a pan-Pakistan middle-class party popular in all core regions: upper Punjab, Peshawar valley and Karachi and even beyond. But this party’s governance and democratic records are poor too, like the older elite parties.

These trends are forcing elements of the state to resort to desperate ways of retaining its hege­mony as its options dwindle: mutually conflicting ties with multiple global pat­rons to scavenge various bits of key aid, new docile ele­cted allies, cruder rigging and gagg­ing, not too covert co-governance in more domains and using force even in core regions against dissident ex-middle-class allies. Even so, this hybrid set-up remains divided and inept and may not survive, let alone thrive. What options will unelected forces use if they fail? More force, overt rule or technocracy? But these won’t succeed and will, in fact, upend critical Western support. So, good governance eludes all elite factions. Governance can only improve by nixing elite politics for organic pro-poor politics.

Can society tame this unelected being? It may need a joint effort to overpower the flailing behemoth. So, we enter a new phase of high turbulence: economic volatility, political instability, and high insecurity. Passengers must fasten their seat belts, if they have one, as the captain won’t turn on the signs.

*The writer is a political economist with a PhD from the University of California, Berkeley.*

[**murtazaniaz@yahoo.com**](http://mailto:murtazaniaz@yahoo.com)

**X:** [**@NiazMurtaza2**](https://twitter.com/NiazMurtaza2)

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