**Power, privilege and the people**

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Thursday, Oct 05, 2023

Almost every political analyst thinks that it will be extremely difficult to rescue Pakistan from the economic, social and political chaos it currently finds itself in. People on the streets also agree though there are some voices of patriotism insisting that we are still a developing country.

This may indeed be the case, but several incidents suggest otherwise. According to media reports, dozens of students from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) were arrested last month for cheating during the prestigious MDCAT examinations held across the country.

In what appears to be a well-orchestrated scheme, candidates paid out hundreds of thousands of rupees to get access to information passed to them through bluetooth devices when they sat for the exam. It is now clear that a major fraud was committed during the exam. What is even more troubling is the fact that even though this fraud was fortunately identified, in most cases such cheating adventures go unnoticed.

This incident also points to the possibility of the country having some candidates in medical schools who do not pass the criteria required to study medicine, treat patients and conduct major surgeries. While in this case, many students were caught. But we do not know how many got away or how many have paid bribes to escape the arms of the law. Similar scandals have surfaced previously as well, and there is a chance that it will inevitably happen again.

The cheating saga clearly shows that we have lost ethics and morality with parents helping out children at much earlier stages to get past this system and acquire high grades through illegal means even at the school level. This then is the power of privilege. It means people who do not deserve it are able to get into prestigious institutions because they have secured marks through unfair means. Children from influential families benefit from the privilege of their parents at the school level as well. Privilege then prevails over merit.

This of course is an extremely dangerous situation – dangerous in more ways than one. It takes away the basic standards of morality. But beyond that, it puts other people at risk. These are often poorer people with less privilege who visit government-owned cheaper hospitals, where many of the candidates who used unfair means to pass the exam could be posted. Of course, in some cases, privilege may take them to top institutions.

Poor patients who end up being treated by such candidates cannot even be assured the safe delivery of a child or safety during a minor procedure. Anyone who knows how some candidates dodge the system will have this fear that the doctors treating them are inept and unable to perform basic functions. We already know that some lab workers carry out vital procedures for candidates and students in exchange for money to help them pass exams.

This is the state of our nation. We have used technology and learned how to use it to defeat the system. The prestige of the MDCAT exam has gone forever. No one can trust doctors who treat them at hospitals or who come to their aid. The same is true of persons in other professions whether it be nursing, teaching, or the police. Even in law, we know that there are lawyers who have obtained their degrees through illegal means. The problem is a real one and needs to be tackled.

We are also aware that at the same time, there are poorer children who scramble through schools of a lower standard but still manage to make it to top institutions, obtain high grades, and get degrees as doctors or lawyers, or another profession. They do so without the aid of bluetooth devices or other similar means. Yet there is no distinction between these two layers, and no way of determining who has truly achieved the grades they boast of.

In fact, too often, the privileged elite who have cheated their way to the top will gain other benefits in the future as they continue along their journey. There is something very fundamentally wrong with this system.

We do not discuss the realities of such underhand deals, mainly because we have other important issues at the national level to discuss as well. But what can one say of a country where unqualified persons treat patients in hospitals across the country simply because their parents have money or what we call privilege to allow them to do so? What can we say about the future of those children who do not have this privilege?

While it is true that a few students from humble backgrounds reach the top, it is also true that most do not. They simply do not have the power to do so in terms of tuition facilities and other help along the way. Measures must be taken to ensure that the situation is prevented in the future. We cannot have so much malafide going on at all levels.

This is especially true as the malafide creeps into all walks of life, whether it be the judiciary or professions ranging from medicine to academic and many other fields. In fact, we have instances of enormous fraud in all these areas. This needs to change, and quickly. How this will happen is difficult to say, but the process has to start swiftly and immediately.

In the first place, there must be some attempt to equalize society and amend the vast disparities which exist within it. Over the years, these disparities have increased and created a highly uneven playing field which benefits no one.

We need to make sure that people cannot get away with cheating or other wrongdoing, simply by paying out large sums of money. We also need to make some efforts to equalize the economic disparity which experts say is amongst the highest in the world and almost certainly the highest in South Asia.

We cannot wait too long for this to happen. We already have a country which is near failure. It cannot survive much longer in this situation. There are other countries that have been able to restore their positions after falling into this kind of vortex. But this can be acquired only if we have the right leadership.

We also need commitment from the privileged – which includes commitment to poorer segments of society – and a determination to build all of Pakistan instead of focusing on the futures of those who have immense wealth, but not the ethics or morality to go with it. This is also a factor, which affects the tax culture and so much else in life.

Change has to be made and the MDCAT example suggests it has to come quickly and before we lose more of our youth to unfair play.

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