**[Vanity, insanity](https://www.dawn.com/news/1851739/vanity-insanity)**

[Shaukat Ahmed](https://www.dawn.com/authors/11204/shaukat-ahmed) Published August 12, 2024

IN a country where opportunities are scarce and the dreams of many crushed by adversity and obstacles, [Arshad Nadeem’s Olympic triumph](https://www.dawn.com/news/1851056/arshad-nadeem-hurls-himself-into-history-with-olympic-gold) reverberates with a message far more profound than the accolade itself.

It is a clarion call to the nation, urging it to dream beyond limitations and believe in the possibility of greatness, no matter how distant it may seem. Nadeem’s triumph offers a rare moment of collective national pride, validating the aspirations of an entire country through the extraordinary achievement of one man.

Yet, in the wake of such a monumental victory, a curious and somewhat disheartening spectacle unfolded on social media. A day after Nadeem’s gold medal win, a [widely circulated video](https://twitter.com/PMLNDigital/status/1821756295273160941) captured Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif watching the event on television. In the video, a member of his political party could be heard repeatedly attributing Nadeem’s success to the PM’s vision — a statement as perplexing as it was disingenuous.

Here was a man, Arshad Nadeem, who had clawed his way to the top through sheer talent and hard work, achieving the seemingly impossible against all odds and entirely on his own. And yet, in the corridors of power, there was an attempt to co-opt his victory, to somehow [claim](https://twitter.com/CMShehbaz/status/1821638652704989479) it as a product of strategic vision and foresight. It was a moment that laid bare the vanity and self-importance that so often taint the higher echelons of power and which perfectly encapsulated the disconnect between Pakistan’s political leadership and the realities of its people.

This disconnect is not merely an isolated incident; it is a pervasive issue that runs deep within the fabric of Pakistan’s political landscape. While there can be no doubt that the PM, like all Pakistanis, was genuinely elated by Nadeem’s victory, the fact that his subordinates felt the need to make it about his vision speaks volumes about the state of leadership in the country. The role of a political leader should be that of a custodian of the people’s trust, working tirelessly to create conditions for their success.

Instead, what we often witness is a grotesque inversion of this ideal, where leaders, surrounded by sycophants, begin to see themselves as monarchs. Their egos, inflated by the constant praise of those who seek to curry favour, appear to be almost addicted to the flattery that blinds them to the true needs of the people they are meant to serve.

You start to wonder — was there a recent constitutional amendment that turned politicians into royalty?

If you’ve ever had the opportunity of visiting a Pakistani political leader, especially one in power, you might be forgiven for thinking you’ve accidentally stumbled into a royal court rather than the office of a public representative. The experience is nothing short of a modern-day re-enactment of a Mughal durbar. As you enter the room, you’re greeted by a sea of obsequious followers, all vying for the leader’s attention, each more eager than the last to prove their devotion and loyalty. The leader sits at the centre of it all, basking in the glow of adoration, every bit the king without a crown. And should you find yourself identified by the leader as someone of importance, a torrent of sycophancy cascades upon you as well.

In this world, proximity to power transforms even the most indifferent observer into an object of reverence. You start to wonder — was there a recent constitutional amendment that turned politicians into royalty? The scene is so absurd that it’s almost comical — until you remember that these are the people running the country.

This vanity on display is not just an amusing quirk; it’s a symptom of a much deeper problem. When a leader begins to believe in their own infallibility, bolstered by a chorus of adulators, they lose sight of their true purpose: to serve the public.

Contrast this with leadership in the world’s most influential countries. While politicians in Pakistan wield significant power within their own context, it pales in comparison with the global impact and authority of officeholders in these developed nations. Yet, in these countries, there is no pomp, no retinue of yes-people fawning over every word. Instead, leadership is recognised as a responsibility, rooted in accountability to those who have entrusted their hopes and dreams to them. The trappings of authority are often set aside in favour of humility and accessibility, with a conscious effort to demystify the office and remind the public that these leaders are merely their servants.

The self-adulation and pretentiousness that often characterise Pakistan’s political class are not just confined to the corridors of power; they have, regrettably, evolved into a national mindset. Across all fields — whether in politics, business, media, or any domain wielding significance or power — there seems to be a constant need for reaffirmation through public displays of importance. This culture of vanity pervades society, creating a vicious cycle where the appearance of success is valued more than the substance of achievement.

Arshad Nadeem’s Olympic victory serves as a powerful reminder of what can be achieved through [determination and hard work](https://www.dawn.com/news/1850440/its-all-or-nothing-for-arshad-nadeem-in-paris). As a nation, there is much to be learned from his example. Greatness is not about the adulation of others; it is about perseverance, humility, and an unwavering commitment to one’s goals.

The world does not need to be told to recognise greatness — it instinctively knows when it has witnessed something extraordinary. In the purity of true achievement, there is no need for orchestrated praise. It stands tall, unassisted and unadorned, for all the world to see.

Nadeem’s remarkable achievement is a lesson in the power of authentic greatness to inspire, uplift, and unite. Perhaps, in celebrating this moment of triumph, we can begin to move away from the culture of pretentiousness that has long held us back and embrace a future where leadership is defined not by vanity, but by service — where the focus shifts from superficial exhibitionism to genuine service. It is in the quiet strength of sincere purpose, rather than in the clamour of self-promotion, that leaders find their greatest impact.

*The writer is an entrepreneur based in the US and UK.*

[*sar@aya.yale.edu*](http://sar@aya.yale.edu)

X: [*@viewpointsar*](http://@viewpointsar)

*Published in Dawn, August 12th, 2024*