

Pakistan Needs an End to Dynastic Politics

By Dr. Masood Ashraf Raja

A few months ago the Pakistani Twittersphere went ballistic when Maryam Nawaz, daughter of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, declared herself a part of “Ruling Family,” thus suggesting as if she and her family, somehow, should enjoy some special privileges and rights within Pakistan. In a democracy, of course, such ideas are absurd, but sadly some major political parties in Pakistan are built as dynasties and while the average workers may get a chance to advance to a certain level, the top echelons of these political parties still consist of either the children of their founders or close relatives. At this point, the Muslim League (N), Pakistan Peoples Party, and Awwami National Party are all governed by either the founders or the progeny of the founders; same rules always apply to quite a few regional political parties.

If Pakistan hopes to develop a viable democratic system, and if the civic structures and practices are to be reshaped within this democratic norm, then the political parties need to be openly democratic, which means that the party leadership should not be passed from one generation of a family to another. The parties should hold open elections to elect their leadership and the top leadership positions should be open to all members of a political party. Otherwise the entire nation ends up becoming the private property of one large extended political family. Look at the recent Nawaz Sharif cabinet, for example. Almost all the major cabinet positions were either held by Mr. Sharif’s immediate family members or the members of his extended family.¹

¹ In fact, according to some reports at one point at least 17 members of Nawaz family held political positions and over all, it is said by some, 84 members of this family were in powerful top positions at one time. [“Family politics of Pakistan PM Nawaz Sharif.”](#)

Of course, when such is the case with the most powerful political positions in the government, then the children of these leaders feel aptly justified in thinking of themselves as a “natural” ruling class. Our so-called leaders forget that any powerful regime depends for its survival on the “willing” consent of the people.² For a group of politicians to consider themselves as part of a “natural” ruling class the recognition of this claim must come from the people, for if no one accepts you as ruling class then, your claims notwithstanding, you cannot become this so-called ruling class. The people, on the other hand, should see the kind of hubris that encourages our cultural and political elite to think of themselves as a “ruling class.”

The two major dynasties in our politics, the Sharifs and the Bhuttos, if we look at their histories, were both propped up by military dictators and served the interest of the dictators in the early years of their political rise. Of course, both these families eventually broke away from their masters and charted a political path of their own, but it is our job as the people of Pakistan to keep reminding them that they gained their ludicrous “ruling family” status by either selling their loyalties to the military dictators, or, if we want to go further in the past, by selling their allegiances to our erstwhile colonizers. This critique of the “naturalized” claim to being the rulers must be posed consistently through the media and social media. The idea is to let no one get away with the claim that they, somehow, own our destiny as their birth right!

There is a lot at stake in the process of eliminating dynastic politics; the case is intimately connected with the politics of personality. Any politics that relies on a narrative of liberation at the hands of one man, one leader, is bound to unleash the macro and micro fascist tendencies in our culture. In simple terms, fascism is nothing more than the deeply internalized belief that one single leader can, somehow, solve all our problems. Thus, any time we look around for one strong leader to liberate us, we are expressing our latent

² I am relying on Antonio Gramsci’s explanation of “hegemony” as means of obtaining the willing consent of the people.

fascism.³ By eliminating dynastic politics, we might also be able to dislodge this deep seeded fascism in our souls and might then, ultimately, look for collective solutions to our manifold problems.

We all must look at our political parties to see how democratic they are in their structures before we give them the power to lead our democracy. Yes, there are some religious parties that do tend to be more democratic, but since they consider one single interpretation of religion as the solution to all our problems, their worldview becomes more exclusivist and less democratic. So, despite their democratic practices in selecting their leadership, their vision of the future will always be restrictive and reliant on one way of looking at the world, which can never be a recipe for success in a country as diverse as Pakistan.

So, over all, besides challenging all assertions of “natural” legitimacy by our political elite, we must also be watchful against all those who claim to know the future and have simple solutions for our problems!

(Note: This is a slightly modified version of an article published in Cross Cultural Conversations: <http://masoodraja.com/2017/08/29/pakistan-needs-an-end-to-dynastic-politics/>)

³ This concept of micro fascism comes from the brilliant works of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.