

Beyond corruption: Re-conceptualising the political economy of Pakistan

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*The narrative around corruption at the individual level has been blown out of proportion, to the extent that it is disrupting constructive discussions around the most pressing challenges faced by Pakistani society, writes **Danish Khan**. While it is undoubtedly an issue, he argues political economic discussions would be much more productive if they incorporated analyses of the post-colonial state, as well as class, gender and environmental contradictions.*



The elimination of corruption in all its manifestations is the ultimate state of equilibrium every society wants to achieve. But in Pakistan the narrative of corruption has been blown out of proportion by some segments of body polity and media which have a tendency to obsess over the idea of corruption at the level of the individual (see for example [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). This discourse is very convenient because it allows them to reduce complex socio-economic problems to the notion of flawed individual(s). Therefore, they don't have to link contemporary socio-economic problems with prevailing structures of neoliberal capitalism, particularly as that would imply taking on powerful economic interest groups. Moreover, through this narrative obvious political benefits are to be accrued by political parties which have not as yet been elected to the highest office of the country, e.g. the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI).

This narrative of corruption is problematic on three accounts. First, human agency is constrained by prevailing socio-economic structures. Thus, it tantamount to methodological flaw to simply reduce societal outcomes to actions of an individual(s) without delineating the underlying dynamics. Similarly, in the mainstream discourse in Pakistan, the conceptualisation of the interplay between local and global capitalist economies is conspicuous due to its absence. This severely undermines the conceptualisation of the processes of corruption at the scale of 'institutions' and 'system'.

Second, the contemporary narrative of corruption is not just overtly simplistic but it is also ahistorical. The role of colonial state institutions and the historically asymmetrical power relationship between civilian polity and deep state institutions do not feature in the mainstream analysis of corruption. The history of Pakistan is testimonial to the fact that multiple unconstitutional interventions were justified in the public eye by building a narrative of corruption against civilian polity. For example the governments of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif were undemocratically and unconstitutionally overthrown on corruption charges (amongst others) in 1977 and 1999, respectively. Thus, it is hard to ignore the fact that the narrative of corruption is one of the tools used to discredit civilian governments.

Third, the narrative of corruption has become counter-productive because it dominates the political discourse of Pakistan. Consequently, other important socio-economic issues faced by Pakistani society such as economic inequality; ethnic, gender and religious discrimination; environmental degradation; impediments in early childhood development etc. are neglected. And to make it worst, mainstream media tend to write off these socio-economic challenges as outcomes of corruption without being cognisant of the fact that simple correlation cannot be equated to causality (see, for example, [here](#) and [here](#)).

How exactly corruption impacts processes of economic development can only be answered in the context of wider political economic processes viz. state configuration, institutions and class structures, as discussed by S Akbar Zaidi in a 2014 Economic and Political Weekly [article](#).

I argue here that political economic discussions would be much more productive if they incorporate analyses of the post-colonial state, as well as class, gender and environmental contradictions, which are embedded in socio-economic fabric of Pakistani society. I argue that these four conceptual categories explain much better the political

economic dynamics of Pakistan than a broad brush notion of corruption. More importantly, using these categories would allow policy makers to undertake more informed and apt decisions to address the most pressing challenges faced by Pakistani society.



Women in Rawalpindi queuing to vote in 2013. Credit: [Rachel Clayton/UK Department for International Development CC BY 2.0](#)

Every socio-economic activity presupposes an ecosystem that is favorable to human life. The reproduction of a healthy ecosystem is essential for the reproduction of any economic system. For example, the scientific evidence is very clear: human activity is linked to climate change and Pakistan is [extremely vulnerable](#). As a developing country, Pakistan has to find ways to minimise its carbon footprint without compromising economic development. This requires careful deliberation on multiple levels among all stakeholders – scientists, legislatures, media, local communities and etc. Therefore, the protection of environment should be a central tenant of political economic discourse. Currently debate on climate change is at its nascent stage in Pakistan and it is primarily focused on water scarcity and floods, both of which [pose a huge socio-economic challenge](#).

Empirical evidence suggests that marginalised segments of society tend to suffer disproportionately from environmental degradation. Therefore, class and [gender dynamics](#) are embedded in the political economy of environment. Thus, climate change cannot be simply treated as a technical issue, it has a political economic dimension.

As far as gender dynamics are concerned, empirical evidence shows that women are discriminated in terms of access to food, education and healthcare in Pakistan, and incidences of violence against women are all too frequent. To ensure an end to this, alongside legislative changes, a fundamental change is mandated in the existing paradigm of thinking which objectifies women. Moreover, female labour force participation is very low in Pakistan, highlighting that existing labor market structures are not inclusive. There is a need for affirmative action policies for women in education and labor market which can potentially [neutralise some of these historical gender biases](#). But it is important to point out that women rights are positively correlated with conscious feminist movements. For example, women in the US won the right to suffrage [after decades of political struggle](#). At the current juncture, the mainstream discourse in politics and media [perpetuates existing gender stereotypes](#).

The nature of the post-colonial state in Pakistan is a subject which is well theorised by the likes of [Hamza Alavi](#). Democratic values and attitudes are learned behavior mediated via ideology, culture and politics. To state the obvious, multiple unconstitutional military interventions severely halted the processes of organic development of democratic institutions in Pakistan. Moreover, due to persistence of de facto colonial institutions and path dependency (for detail on this see [here](#)), stark class and social hierarchies are prevalent in Pakistani society.

Moreover, the state policies under the dictatorship of General Zia-ul-Haq fractured Pakistani society across sectarian and ethnic lines. As a result, Pakistan is still facing a huge challenge of religious extremism and violence. This can only be undone by creating an inclusive and democratic state. Therefore, creation and consolidation of democratic and inclusive institutions is necessary for sustainable peace and shared prosperity in Pakistan.

Discussions about the economy are too often limited to debt and inflation. These two variables are undoubtedly significant for macroeconomic stability, but what's even more important to analyse is whether economic growth is inclusive or not. Historically, we have seen that under military regimes of General Yahya Khan in 1960s and General Pervez Musharraf in early 2000s, growth rates were high but elasticity of employment remained low. Consequently, large segments of society were not able to accrue benefits from high economic growth. In fact, high rates of economic growth further fueled social and regional inequality across Pakistan. Thus, inclusive labour market institutions and living wages across Pakistan should be the central tenants across which the discourse on economy should revolve.

In recent years, unprecedented levels of investment (US\$ 51 billion) have been allocated towards infrastructure and energy sectors under the framework of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). This has already catalysed processes of high economic growth and rapid industrialisation in the country. The long term welfare implication of these development processes are contingent on the strengthening of democracy and 'inclusiveness' of environmental, gender, economic and state policies in Pakistan.

The topic of Development will be discussed at the Pakistan @ 70: LSE Pakistan Summit in Karachi on 10-11 April 2017. Registration for the conference opens 8 February. Click [here](#) for more information.

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About the Author

Danish Khan is a Special Assistant to Pakistan's Federal Minister of Planning, Development & Reform on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). He is also a PhD-candidate in the department of Economics at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, USA. His research interests are in the political economy of institutions in the post-colonial societies.



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