

Pakistan: Hail the emperor

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WHO rules Pakistan? Some may say the answer is simple: the establishment. This may be accurate to the extent that our structure of power is conceptualised within our physical borders. But how do we understand the establishment's position in the context of global political and economic powers like the US, China, Saudi Arabia and multilateral entities like the IMF?

And even within Pakistan, does the establishment rule without the support of others? It cannot, even if what we call democracy is simply a façade: after all, parliament has to be convened and sanctify policy through legislation. Can the establishment rule without a supportive judicial apparatus of the state? Can it rule without a pliant media?

Whether Pakistan is a democracy and if our parliaments, courts and media houses have ever been much more than rubber stamps are questions that have animated many decades. Last week, we added another dark chapter to what is already a long and ignominious tale.

The place was the National Assembly, and the matter at hand was the principle of economic sovereignty. To be fair, the opposition did engage in brief but [dramatic protests](#) when the finance minister presented two legislative bills, one levying taxes on a host of items, the other signing away control over the State Bank. It was the latter that triggered slogans and speeches exhorting the government not to 'sell Pakistan's sovereignty'.

Another dark chapter has been added.

The furore lasted a few hours and then we quickly moved on; our intellectual and political mainstream does not dwell, after all, on anything other than breaking news. Truth be told, a government surrendering sovereign policymaking is hardly breaking news in Pakistan. The military establishment and the political players that do its bidding only talk up sovereignty when 'national security' imperatives demand it. The passing of a formal law making the State Bank little more than a wing of the IMF simply follows on the heels of decades during which the IMF and global financiers have exercised informal control over macroeconomic policy.

Indeed, the PTI is simply carrying on from where others left off. Before the current crop came Moeen Qureshi, Shaukat Aziz and Hafeez Sheikh, and they all more or less subscribed to the same vision of 'development' as the present regime. It is true that things have worsened over time, but that is because there are only so many natural resources, cheap labour sources and financialised means for multinational capital to make money. Four decades of so-called 'structural adjustment' has a substantial cumulative effect.

For the most part, neoliberal economics has gone largely unchallenged because a segment of upwardly mobile Pakistanis — clumsily called the 'urban middle class' — has managed to increase its own conspicuous consumption through cheap credit and a small share of financialised asset bubbles like real estate. A robust working class politics would have resisted the tide, but it remains limited.

Even for the 'urban middle class', everything looks awry when inflation shoots through the roof as it

has done over the [past few months](#). Unfortunately, in our race-to-the-bottom political discourse such bad times are never explained by anything more than the failings of individual leaders or ruling regimes. In fact, the structural logics of the neoliberal developmental regime supersede governments and their figureheads; the environment is pillaged, dreams of middle-class aspiration are marketed recklessly, working masses and ethnic peripheries are criminalised and 'good times' eventually give way to 'bad times'.

The tabling of the State Bank Amendment Bill represents a guarantee that even mainstream politicians of the future will not contain the forces of global finance. Mind you, we are not subservient only to the citadels of Western imperialism; we beg the Saudis to front us oil when our import bill climbs too high, and our infrastructure and energy plans are backed by Chinese credit.

All of these rentier ties are based on the original prototype — the Pentagon's historic patronage of our military establishment. Our military-industrial-media complex will never allow for meaningful interrogation of any of the rentier state logics that continue to structure political and economic life. Not least of all because the fallouts of these logics are always borne by the most vulnerable.

Disaggregating this complex certainly clarifies that the establishment calls the shots in domestic politics, but despite the temporary misfortunes that befall mainstream politicians, most of them would rather play second fiddle to the military and imperial patrons rather than stand up for an alternative developmental model. The longer we dwell on this the sooner we will acknowledge that the merry-go-round of mainstream politics must itself be transformed if the bigger story is to change. Or else we will be left to just raise the slogan: all hail the emperor!

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