

## Elite Capture and its Implication for Pakistan 2018-2022

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### Abstract

*Elite capture is a burning issue, common across the world and particularly in Pakistan. It is an unavoidable issue. In Pakistan, the historical pedigree of this phenomenon is deeply rooted in the interplay of power, economic interest, and governance structures. The country has been bitterly entangled in the nutcracker of elite capture since its birth. However, various political developments between 2018 and 2022 have further transformed the country into a purely elitist state. During this era, elite capture remained a critical barrier to meaningful reforms and equitable governance. This study aims to investigate the implications of this phenomenon in the country from 2018-2022. The study adopts qualitative research where both primary and secondary sources have been used for data collection. Procedurally, data has been collected by conducting interviews with experts in the relevant field, which has then been codified and analyzed through the thematic data analysis technique. The study found that elite capture has negatively impacted the society, democracy, and governance of the country. It has increased inequality and created disparity among the masses. Elite capture in Pakistan can be discouraged by establishing a system in which everyone contributes according to his ability and gets according to his needs.*

**Keywords:** Elite, elite capture, inequality, crime, democracy, corruption, social unrest, drug addiction, brain drain

### Introduction

Elite capture is a process by which powerful elites use the resources of poor people and shape policies to protect their interests. It is a situation where the elite design the process of development according to their own needs or use resources of development for private gain (Zulfiqar & Moosvi, 2022).

Elite capture occurs when the advantaged few control institutions and resources that could benefit their interests and aims. The term is used in social science to describe the way socially advantaged people try to get control over the benefits that belong to everyone. In this context, it can be called corruption and has the same symptoms of undue influence, such as

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bribery. But the concept has always been applied to the process of hijacking the political projects in principle or in effect, by the well-positioned and better-resourced.

According to Diya Dutta, elite capture is the presence of unequal access to power. Some elements have greater access to power due to lineage, caste, gender, economic wealth, or some other reason. Resources and public goods such as attention, knowledge, and values are unfairly distributed just as much as political power and material wealth are. Elite capture is symptomatic of social systems with unequal balance of power (Taiwo, 2022).

When powerful wielders of politics like civil-military bureaucracy, big landlords, and businessmen control the process of policy formulation and make the rules of the game themselves to safeguard the interest of their group, it results in the unequal distribution of wealth in the nation and leads to the alienation of citizens from the state. Elite capture involves the making of policy by a small group to use public wealth for their benefit (Baber, 2022).

According to Tanveer Hashmi, elite capture is a global phenomenon, but in developed countries, elites do not work for their benefit at all, due to which the gap between haves and have-nots is not as wide as in Pakistan (Hashmi, 2024).

Elite capture refers to the phenomenon of local elites controlling superior economic and political status to usurp the benefits of community development and decentralization programs that transfer control over public assets to lower-level governance structures, which are assumed to be more susceptible to elite capture because of greater opportunity for collusion. Bardhan and Mookherjee relate the origin of elite capture to the Federalist Paper No. 10. The phenomenon of elite capture later emerged in the Global South when it was used by the colonialists to justify their policies for extracting wealth from the agricultural sector. (Shapland, Paassen, & Almekinders, 2021).

In Pakistan, elite capture is often pervasive and deeply entrenched in various aspects of the society and economy. Political elite, wealthy individuals, and powerful interest groups tend to dominate decision-making processes, economic opportunities, and resources, resulting in a system where a small elite group extracts disproportionate benefits while

the majority of the population struggles with poverty, lack of access to basic services, and limited opportunities for advancement. One of the key manifestations of elite capture in Pakistan is through corruption. Politicians, bureaucrats, and business elites often collude to siphon off public funds, engage in embezzlement, and secure lucrative contracts through kickbacks and bribery. This not only deprives the country of much-needed resources for development but also perpetuates inequality and undermines the rule of law.

According to a report of UNDP for Pakistan, called the National Human Development Report, released last year, about 50% of the national income is held by the 20% richest people of the country, while 7% of the country's income is in the hands of the poorest 20%. According to the estimation of NHDR, more than 37% of public expenditures benefit the wealthiest section of the country, whereas less than 15% of expenditures of public expenditures benefit the poorest section. Moreover, the corporate sector enjoys subsidies, tax breaks, and privileged access to wealth and other public resources. The 2nd and 3rd highest recipients of the state largess are the 1% rich elite groups of the country, who own 9% of the overall income of the country. 1% of feudal families own 22% of cultivable farmland. A major portion of the poor people own no land and survive as seasonal or daily waged agri-labourers and sharecroppers (Ali S. M., 2022).

According to the calculation of UNDP, almost 6% of the country's economy has been provided as privileges to various elite groups in Pakistan. Spending such a huge amount on elite is difficult to justify when human development indicators of the country are the worst in South Asia, and when the country was ranked 153 out of 156 countries on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index last year (Ali S. M., 2022). According to the Oxfam Pakistan inequality report 2020, the top 1% Pakistanis own 10 times more wealth than the bottom 50% (Sabir & Nawaz, 2023). On the other hand, the elite use their influence to live comfortable lives by providing their children with better health, education, and employment opportunities, leading to intergenerational wealth inequality. The role of the elite in perpetuating inequality cannot be overstated. They have established their monopoly over industries, land, and key positions, etc. They have dominated the government and private

sectors and have little interest in promoting the interests of the population. They secure their interest by diverting policies and laws in their favor.

## **Literature Review**

### *Elite Capture*

Taiwo (2022) states that elite capture is the process of hijacking political projects in principle or effect by the people of good positions and better resources, while elites are those citizens who are superior in terms of authority, power, and capability, playing an influential role in a state and society. Elite capture is a common phenomenon in both developing and least developed countries, but now the developed countries are also joining this camp.

### *Elite Domination in Pakistan: From Elite Capture to Elite Abuse*

According to Ramay (2022), like the rest of the world, elites have dominated the Pakistani society as well. They play their negative role in dominating the process of decision making. They shape policies in order to secure their interest at the price of the well-being of the whole community. In Pakistan, the process of elite capture started right after the death of Jinnah, and it was completed in the late 1990s. In Pakistan, there was no opposition to it. After 2000, Pakistan went through another phenomenon called elite abuses. Elite abuses have introduced exclusion instead of minimum distribution. Elite groups auctioned the assets of the state for many years, like the sale of SOEs and the privatization of government services like education, health, and communication etc. Due to the curse of elite capture, now we are mortgaging our airports, buildings, roads, and even parks.

Pakistan is struggling to strengthen its democratic institutions, to secure its sovereignty and economic development, but all in vain. One of the reasons for the failure of democratic institutions, political parties, and political instability is the dilemma of political elites. Elite politics is a hurdle in the way of democracy in Pakistan. Political parties in Pakistan belong to certain families and individuals. These parties serve the interest of these families and individuals rather than the common interest.

### *Undemocratic Practices of Elites*

According to Abbas (2021), in Pakistan, since independence, politics has been dominated by dominant elite groups. In order to keep their powers in hand, they make mutual alliances. The political elite raise slogans for the interest of the common people, but they are reluctant to transfer power to the common people. They consider themselves to have the right to govern the people and try to serve their interests. They do not like to be accountable to the people. The undemocratic behaviors of the political elite, their politics based on individual interest and tug of war, have badly affected the performance of the political government. The pro-imperialistic character and the weak nationalistic approach of Pakistani ruling elites led to the decline of party politics.

#### *Sources of Elite Power in Pakistan*

Khan U (2021) states that in Pakistan elite draw their strength from different sources, i.e., state ideology, colonial legacy, political power, and institutional strength of unelected apparatuses, centralized state structure, weakness of the elected institutions, and factional interest. They hold power by adopting various ways and means like alliances, co-option, sidelining the key politicians, and capturing the referees. These elites do not acknowledge democratic norms such as mutual toleration, convergence, and institutional forbearance. They are status quo oriented and strive to hold their power and status. Among them, the military elite try to retain their institutional integrity, the bureaucratic elite do not give up their colonial legacy, the judiciary is overconfident and assertive, the urban elite try to become richer and protect their business, religious elite seek theocracy while the electable(s) strive to build connection with military.

#### *Elite Resistance to Reforms*

According to Markey (2013), the main hurdle in the way of reforms in the country is the Pakistani elites. They resist any revolutionary change and dramatic collapse. They avoid paying taxes. They have flopped the halfhearted attempts at the land reforms. They have maintained a grip on the economic and political powers by denying education and other basic rights of the people who serve them.

*Research Gap*

Literature is available regarding elites, types of elites, power elites in Pakistan, political kinship, the role of elites in Pakistan, influence of power elites on democracy in Pakistan, etc., but no one has done work on elite capture and its implications from 2018 to 2022.

*Theoretical Framework*

The theory that has been applied to this study is the theory of extractive and inclusive political institutions presented by Daron Acemoglu and A. Robinson. According to this theory, inclusive institutions are those where pluralism and maximum public participation are ensured, and economic benefits and incentives are widely shared. Extractive institutions are created for the benefit of a small elite group and are sustained for their benefit. Inclusive institutions progress to prosperity while extractive institutions end up being fragile and poor (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

In Pakistan, most institutions are examples of extractive institutions, which are captured by selected groups of individuals called elites. The historical development of Pakistani institutions shows how these institutions have contributed to elite capture.

**Methodology**

This study answers two questions, i.e., (i) what is elite capture? And (ii) what are the implications of elite capture for Pakistan? This study has two objectives, i.e., to investigate elite capture and find out its implications for Pakistan during 2018 to 2022. This is a qualitative study, uses both primary as well as secondary data. Primary data has been collected through interviews. For this purpose, semi-structured interviews have been conducted with 25 interviewees, experts in the relevant field, i.e., political economists, journalists, and academicians. The data has then been analyzed through thematic analysis.

*Implications of Elite Capture**Implications for society**Social Unrest*

Social unrest involves protests, brutality, and divisions—religious or ethnic—that disrupt societal stability. Factors like economic instability, joblessness, and wealth concentration contribute to this unrest in both developing and developed nations (Aman, Akram, & Saud, 2018). Strikes and demonstrations frequently emerge as expressions of discontent in

Pakistan, organized by various political, religious, and social groups to address grievances and pressure the government.

The perception of elite capture gives rise to discontent, resulting in protests among marginalized groups. This elite capture creates economic disparity, evident in annual protests by government employees for salary increases. Citizens also demand fundamental rights, protesting issues like inflation, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings. Government responses to these protests often worsen frustrations (Khan D. N., 2024).

### *Increased Inequality*

The world grapples with significant inequality, with over 734 million people living in extreme poverty on less than US\$1.90 a day. This inequality arises from disparities in income, education, and access to opportunities, often increased by policies manipulated by powerful groups and social discrimination based on gender, caste, or religion (Pasha, 2020).

In Pakistan, Dr. Hafeez Pasha's UNDP report identifies three main drivers of inequality: power, people, and policy. "Power" describes how privileged groups exploit networks for personal gain. The second driver, "people," addresses societal biases against various identities, as about three million Pakistanis endure modern slavery as bonded laborers (Ostby, 2021).

The third driver, "policy," involves ineffective strategies that conflict with the principles of social justice. The National Human Development Report (NHDR) highlights that inequality has fostered two distinct Pakistan's, limited individual freedom and resulted in an interplay of prejudices, corruption, taxation, politics, and development priorities (Pasha, 2020).

Pakistan faces significant inequalities along ethnic, spatial, and gender lines, hindering human development. According to Oxfam, the country suffers from stark income disparity, with women's workforce participation ranking last in SAARC. Additionally, it has one of the world's highest rates of out-of-school children, with only 86 girls in primary or lower secondary schools for every 100 boys, highlighting socio-economic barriers (Siddiqui, 2023).

Elite capture of resources worsens these inequalities, concentrating wealth and power among a small group, which expands the gap between the rich and the poor. This leads to disparities in income,

access to services, and opportunities, reinforcing social hierarchies (Khan D. U., 2023). The uneven distribution of national wealth continues to deepen class divides in Pakistan (Tariq, 2024).

### *Social Stratification*

In Pakistan, social stratification comprises three primary classes: lower, middle, and upper, alongside upper, middle, and lower strata defined by factors like caste, tribe, clan, and kinship. This hierarchy can lead to conflict, especially when elites exploit their power to extract resources from deprived segments.

The upper class enjoys luxury—opulent cars, bungalows, and designer clothes—embracing Western lifestyles in food, education, and fashion. This segment often includes politicians, diplomats, and businessmen, displaying a stylish, Western-oriented identity.

In contrast, the middle class consists mainly of working individuals striving for better standards of life and education, often aspiring to join the upper class. The lower class, however, struggles to fulfill even basic needs, focusing solely on survival. Pakistan's social structure remains predominantly tribal and ultraconservative, lacking room for democratic ideals. Traditional authorities like Khans, Maliks, and Waderas dominate society, often sidelining the masses and genuinely elected leaders (Khan D. R., 2019).

Social stratification in Pakistan is shaped by its history and culture, dividing society into classes based on wealth, occupation, education, and family background. At the top are elites—wealthy business owners, politicians, and landowners—who possess significant power and resources. This creates a stark contrast with lower classes, who often struggle to meet basic needs.

The middle class includes professionals and entrepreneurs with moderate wealth and social status, enjoying better education and job opportunities than the lower classes, but still facing economic instability. In contrast, the lower class comprises manual laborers and agricultural workers lacking essentials like healthcare and clean water, emphasizing significant disparities in living conditions.

Factors such as gender, ethnicity, and religion exacerbate social stratification, limiting advancement opportunities and contributing to



widening gaps between rich and poor. Despite efforts toward equality, elite capture deepens these divisions, fostering resentment and potential unrest as class, ethnic, and regional divides become more pronounced in society.

### *Limited Social Mobility*

Elite capture hampers social mobility in Pakistan, allowing wealthy families to remain affluent while working-class children struggle for opportunities. Access to quality education poses a significant barrier, with public schools in rural and impoverished urban areas lacking essential resources and qualified teachers. Private schools, offering better education, remain financially inaccessible for most families, further restricting upward mobility for less privileged students.

The concentration of wealth among the members of a small elite group limits economic opportunities for most Pakistanis. High unemployment rates and low wages in the informal sector reinforce economic stratification. The job market is influenced by nepotism, making personal connections essential for securing employment, which disadvantages those lacking such networks. Additionally, traditional norms and the caste system in rural areas perpetuate social stratification, particularly for historically marginalized communities.

Women face further barriers due to cultural norms and discrimination that hinder their access to education, employment, and healthcare. Societal expectations regarding gender roles restrict their upward mobility. Corruption and ineffective governance obstruct efforts to create equality, with poorly implemented policies and weak social welfare programs failing to support disadvantaged groups. This elite capture complicates the ability of less privileged individuals to advance within the social and economic hierarchy.

### *Social Injustice*

Societies with inclusive and efficient justice mechanisms thrive under the rule of law, enjoying significant economic, social, and political benefits. In contrast, countries like Pakistan, with compromised justice systems, face challenges that undermine true justice, fostering a "might is right" mentality. Many Pakistanis experience despair as justice appears

reserved for the powerful, leading to alienation and growing frustration (Bangwar, 2023).

Essential workers in Pakistan, including security guards, sanitation personnel, coal mine workers, and petrol pump employees, endure low wages, job insecurity, and hazardous conditions. They are denied their rightful wages, dignity, and human rights, struggling in dangerous environments (Sadiq, 2023).

Social injustice highlights the unequal distribution of societal burdens and rewards. According to the UN Declaration of Human Rights, every individual deserves equal access to resources, regardless of race, color, or belief. Since its independence, Pakistan has faced exploitation by an elite class, with dynastic politics creating a stark power disparity. Wealth is concentrated among a few families, causing the rich to grow richer and the poor to become poorer. The poverty line is expanding, yet policymakers remain entrenched, failing to improve living standards or bridge class differences while perpetuating false narratives.

Pakistan's lack of social democracy is evident as politicians ignore essential social programs that address unemployment and welfare. Individuals face disrespect based on background and education, while honesty is not valued. Critical areas like health, housing, and education are neglected, hindering the development of a patriotic society focused on collective interests. Additionally, religious tolerance and constitutional respect are overlooked.

The five basic principles of social justice—access to resources, equity, participation, diversity, and human rights—are vital for a fair society. Among these, 'access to resources' ensures equal opportunities for food, housing, health, education, and employment across socio-economic classes. The government must uphold this principle.

Equality is essential for social justice, mandating equal opportunities for success despite past injustices. Resources should be allocated to aid deprived sections, dismantling barriers that hinder competition with the privileged. Policies must tackle these systemic barriers. Participation ensures every individual can voice their concerns in decision-making processes. Often, public policies are shaped by a few powerful people, leaving many marginalized.

Diversity demands that government and leadership reflect all social classes, ensuring equal representation of men, women, and minorities. It's important to recognize that some groups face heightened obstacles due to discrimination based on color, race, sex, language, and religion.

Human rights are essential for social justice; without them, social justice cannot exist. This includes not only political rights but also freedoms, protection from police abuse, and reproductive rights.

In Pakistan, elite capture is widespread, allowing powerful individuals to manipulate policies for personal gain, further disadvantaging marginalized groups. This increases inequality, concentrating wealth and opportunities in the hands of a few while many struggle for necessities like education and healthcare. Elite capture often involves corrupt practices, such as bribery and nepotism, that erode trust in institutions and disrupt transparent governance, complicating efforts toward social justice.

Such capture limits the political engagement of marginalized communities, allowing elites to dominate decision-making and shape policies that ignore the needs of vulnerable populations. It reinforces social hierarchies and curtails social mobility, enabling the privileged to thrive while others remain trapped in poverty and exclusion. Moreover, the lack of accountability for elites fosters a culture of impunity, undermining justice, fairness, and equality in society.

### *Rising Crimes*

The elite-dominated class system in Pakistan has worsened inequality, leading to higher poverty rates driven by inflation and unemployment. This economic pressure correlates with rising crime rates as poverty intensifies stress and mental health issues. Income inequality further fuels crime, encouraging organized crime groups, drug trafficking, and terrorism. Key factors driving these crime increases include:

1. Socioeconomic issues like poverty and unemployment create desperation.
2. Substance abuse, impairing judgment, and provoking aggression.
3. Limited access to education and social services, hindering opportunities.
4. Weak law enforcement and justice systems, reducing accountability.
5. Political instability and corruption foster crime environments.

6. Social unrest and conflict, increasing violence potential.

Dr. Nawaz Khan highlights elite capture as a central issue in Pakistan, linked to significant problems like theft and burglary, with 173,000 cases reported in 2020, causing financial losses and psychological distress (Khan D. N., 2024).

Recently, violent crimes, including murder, armed robbery, and kidnapping, have risen, often influenced by political, religious, or ethnic motives, leading to high-profile assassinations.

Human trafficking and child abuse are urgent concerns, with domestic and international trafficking networks active in the country. The Global Slavery Index reveals that Pakistan has one of the highest populations of enslaved individuals globally.

#### *Implications for Governance*

Pakistan, as a developing nation, has faced substantial governance challenges since its independence, including political instability, corruption, weak institutions, and insufficient accountability; all of them are obstructing its progress (Zia-ur-Rehman, 2023).

Corruption is a critical issue in Pakistan, affecting governmental and private sectors, which erodes public trust. Political instability manifests through political assassinations, military coups, and sectarian violence, complicating governance further. Weak institutions such as the judiciary, police, and bureaucracy suffer from underfunding and inadequate training. The lack of accountability allows those in power to operate without fear of repercussions, worsening governance failures (Zia-ur-Rehman, 2023).

Good governance remains elusive in Pakistan, marked by institutional failures, corruption, constitutional crises, and poor law enforcement (Khan & Alam, 2020). Mushtaq Ahmad Khan pointed out that true governance is lacking, as citizens face denied justice and fundamental rights. The law-and-order situation is alarming, with minimal oversight in markets leading to exploitation (Khan M. A., 2024).

Dr. Darvish Khan Afridi emphasizes that elite capture constitutes not just an economic issue but a fundamental governance challenge, resulting in significant political problems (Afridi, 2024). The impact of elite capture

on governance in Pakistan can be discussed by studying the following indicators of governance.

### *Participations*

Citizen participation is essential for good governance in a democratic country, where all stakeholders are invited to engage in decision-making, with the public being the most vital participants. However, in Pakistan, low citizen involvement poses a significant governance challenge.

Elite capture greatly influences political participation in Pakistan by fostering disenfranchisement, inequality, and a lack of accountability. Dr. Mushtaq Ahmad, a retired bureaucrat and professor, points out that elite capture undermines democracy by consolidating power among a few individuals or groups. This concentration can lead to policies that favor the elite over the general populace, harming broader societal interests (Ahmad D. M., 2024).

Moreover, elite capture fosters alienation among ordinary citizens who feel marginalized from the political process. When a small elite exerts disproportionate influence over political outcomes, it discourages the public from participating in elections and civic activities, as they may view their efforts as pointless against entrenched interests.

### *Rule of law*

The rule of law is essential for good governance, providing equal opportunities and safeguarding human rights, especially for minorities. Courts, along with police and prosecution, play a key role in maintaining the rule of law.

According to Dr. Ikramullah, elite capture undermines justice, fairness, and accountability. A small elite group's monopolization of political and economic power leads to manipulation of the law in their favor, perpetuating inequality and undermining a just society (Ikramullah, 2024).

Saleem Safi pointed out that elite capture resulted in selective law enforcement, granting the powerful preferential treatment while marginalized groups faced harsher penalties. This unfair justice system damaged public trust and fostered perceptions of injustice (Safi, 2024).

*Corruption*

Corruption significantly hinders economic prosperity globally, costing around 2% of the world's GDP, or USD two trillion, as per a 2016 IMF report. The World Bank identifies corruption through bribery, embezzlement, and fraud, which obstructs social and economic growth. Pakistan, a developing nation, has faced this issue since its inception (Kirsanli, 2018).

The 2023 National Corruption Perception Survey (NCPS) by Transparency International Pakistan reveals that the police are viewed as the most corrupt institution (30%), followed by the Tendering and Contracting sector (16%) and the judiciary (13%). Education and health sectors are ranked fourth and fifth, respectively. The average bribe in the judiciary is approximately 25,846 rupees.

Regionally, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa reported the highest average bribe at Rs 162,000, while in Punjab, bribes paid to the police average Rs 21,186. In Balochistan, health facilities experienced an average bribe of Rs 160,000 (TIP, 2023).

The NCPS indicates that 68% of Pakistanis believe agencies like NAB, FIA, and the Anti-Corruption Establishment are misused for political purposes. Additionally, 60% of respondents advocate for abolishing these institutions, citing their ineffectiveness in tackling corruption. A striking 75% think the private sector holds excessive power, which contributes to corruption, while 36% perceive anti-corruption agencies as ineffective. At the national level, 47% view corruption as the primary barrier to development, and 62% believe it drives environmental degradation and climate change (TIP, 2023).

Corruption, particularly through elite capture, plays a significant role in Pakistan's economic crisis. This phenomenon involves exploiting power for personal gain, leading to a lack of accountability and eroding trust in institutions. Elite capture distorts market mechanisms, discourages investment, and undermines transparency in governance, severely impacting economic growth (Kiani, 2024). Furthermore, it stifles competition and innovation, limiting opportunities for new businesses and hindering overall economic dynamism.

*Transparency*

Transparency is crucial against corruption, yet Pakistan ranks 117 out of 180 with a low score of 33 out of 100 (Zia-ur-Rehman, 2023). Elite capture significantly impacts transparency by allowing a small privileged group to dominate information, decision-making, and resource access. This undermines openness, accountability, and public trust in government. With elite capture, a few individuals can control the flow of information, affecting media outlets and government communication, manipulating public narratives to benefit their interests. Consequently, transparency suffers, restricting public access to vital information that impacts their lives and well-being.

*Lack of Public Trust in Government*

Trust is a crucial element in governance, linking government and citizens. Without trust, management issues and law enforcement problems arise, leading to conflicts. Government performance relies heavily on the trust between the governed and the government (Naseer, 2007).

In recent decades, many countries, including Pakistan, have experienced a decline in public trust in government institutions. Citizens feel their governments often fail to act in their best interests, largely due to inadequate accountability, transparency, and equitable governance (Jehangir, 2024).

This lack of trust is especially evident in public education. Low teaching standards, insufficient resources, outdated curricula, and overcrowded classrooms lead many to prefer private institutions, perceived as higher quality. Unfortunately, public schools remain the only option for many children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, worsening educational inequities.

Similarly, there is a widespread lack of trust in public sector hospitals, stemming from inadequate care, poor management, and misdiagnoses. In these facilities, unauthorized behavior often prevails, with doctors treating patients dismissively, while satisfactory care is more frequently observed in private clinics.

Interactions with police often lead to reluctance among citizens due to perceived despotic treatment, causing hesitation to seek help again. Justice in courts is challenging, especially when citizens view the elite as above the law, creating a cycle where some resort to crime.

Hesitance regarding vaccinations, particularly the Polio vaccine, is notable, with many viewing it as unsafe or part of a Western conspiracy against Muslims. This distrust extends to COVID-19 vaccinations, amplified by misinformation on social media regarding safety and side effects.

Trust in the democratic process in Pakistan has eroded significantly, with a Gallup poll (September-October 2023) showing that 70% of Pakistanis lack faith in electoral integrity and government (Gul, 2024). This disillusionment arises from elite capture, fostering the belief that the government serves a privileged few, leading to disengagement from civic participation. Habibullah Khan Khatak, a former bureaucrat, highlights that such indifference causes citizens to feel disconnected from their government, viewing it as alien rather than their own (Khattak, 2024).

### *Responsiveness of Institutions*

There must be responsiveness within state institutions to ensure good governance, providing services to the public during critical times. In Pakistan, elite capture significantly impacts institutional responsiveness, distorting decision-making, undermining accountability, and leading to ineffective governance. The influence of a powerful elite group often hinders institutions from addressing broader public needs, resulting in a lack of responsiveness.

When institutions serve elite interests, decision-making tends to favor a narrow group rather than the larger population. This skewing of policies benefits the privileged few, neglecting diverse societal needs and perpetuating inequality, while marginalizing vulnerable communities and failing to tackle pressing social issues.

### *Equity and Inclusiveness*

Equity and inclusiveness are essential for good governance, ensuring equal opportunities for all. However, individuals in society differ in wisdom, intellect, and health, necessitating government intervention. By allocating funds to marginalized segments, the government can help bridge the gap with privileged classes.

According to Abbas Musvi, elite capture increases inequalities within Pakistani society. When political and economic resources are



monopolized by a few, disparities in income and access to opportunities grow, fostering feelings of injustice among marginalized communities. This erodes trust in the political system, discouraging participation in democracy (Musvi, 2024).

Elite capture worsens social and economic inequality, reinforcing privilege and exclusion. When elites shape laws to their advantage, the divide between rich and poor expands, resulting in systemic injustice. This undermines the rule of law, as legal systems prioritize elite interests over the broader population, perpetuating cycles of poverty and exclusion.

### *Efficiency and Effectiveness*

Good governance pillars enable institutions to meet people's needs efficiently, raising living standards. In an interview with Sohail Riaz, a Karachi-based journalist for BBC Urdu, he highlighted that elite capture profoundly affects the government's effectiveness in Pakistan. A small elite controlling political and economic resources hampers public service delivery, social issue resolution, and inclusive development (Sohail, 2023).

Riaz noted that elite capture leads to corrupt governance practices, where the elite prioritize personal interests over the public good. This causes resource mismanagement, decision-making irregularities, and ineffective policy implementation. Consequently, the government allocates resources based on favoritism rather than merit, resulting in service delivery inefficiencies and inequities.

### *Accountability*

Elite capture significantly undermines good governance, disrupting accountability and transparency. Watchdogs' designs to ensure government oversight can be manipulated by the elite, who evade scrutiny and regulations. According to Umar Cheema, this creates a culture of impunity, allowing powerful individuals to act without fear of consequences (Cheema, 2024). Consequently, government institutions may fail to hold them accountable, leading to widespread distrust and eroding public confidence in the rule of law (Missen, 2024).

*Leadership Vacuum*

Leadership transcends mere titles; it embodies empowerment through compassion, insight, intellect, and optics. It requires inclusive thinking to guide the nation, predict dangers, heal societal wounds, unite diverse groups, and avoid fragmentation. Since Quaid-e-Azam's demise, Pakistan has faced a leadership vacuum, hindering prosperity and causing stagnation (Alam, 2021).

Dr. Ghulam Qasim Marwat notes that Pakistani leaders are not incompetent but rather self-serving. They prioritize personal interests, accumulating wealth from fiefs and industries, operating offshore companies, and exploiting national resources, thereby draining wealth from marginalized communities (Marwat, 2024).

*Implications for Democracy*

Critics argue that Pakistani democracy represents “government of the elite, by the elites, and for the elites,” with a privileged group exerting disproportionate influence. This elite dominance often results in policies that favor their interests over the broader population. Mushtaq Ahmad Khan suggests that elite capture undermines democracy’s core principles of fairness and representation, leading to the marginalization of underrepresented groups and weakening democratic legitimacy (Khan M. A., 2024).

Moreover, elite capture obstructs accountability, as those in power manipulate systems to avoid scrutiny and consequences, fostering impunity. Dr. Munas Ahmar highlights that Pakistan's democratic maturation is hindered by a lack of political pluralism. Consequently, the populace often disengages from democratic processes, perceiving little hope in political institutions, which can devolve into family-run entities (Ahmar, 2024).

The essential features of democracy in Pakistan—accountability, representation, and participation—are adversely affected by elite capture. This situation stifles the political aspirations of the masses and perpetuates a governance model resistant to meaningful democratic transformation. Unless elite dominance is addressed, a robust, inclusive democracy remains unattainable.

*Free and Fair Elections*

Free and fair elections are vital for democracy, ensuring equal access to a confidential electoral process. In Pakistan, the elections of 2013 and 2018 faced controversy, with opposition parties disputing results due to alleged malpractice and external interference (Mahar, Malik, & Bakhtiar, 2023).

Elites in Pakistan significantly influence electoral outcomes through financial resources, enabling them to fund campaigns, mobilize support, and shape public opinion, as noted by Dr. Aasim Sajjad Akhtar. They may capture key institutions, such as the Election Commission and judiciary, allowing manipulation of electoral processes and suppression of dissent. Elites also exploit social and political networks to build alliances and secure influential support, often manipulating religious or ethnic identities to consolidate their electoral base and marginalize opposition (Akhtar, 2024).

Khaliq Kiani emphasizes that Pakistani elites often control political parties, ensuring that only candidates aligned with their interests are nominated. They frequently engage in electoral fraud, such as voter intimidation, ballot stuffing, and result tampering, to secure victories. Additionally, elites misuse state resources for an unfair advantage in elections (Kiani, 2024).

They also influence the media to portray specific candidates favorably and undermine opponents, shaping public perception. Coercion and intimidation are used to suppress dissent and discourage voter participation. Furthermore, elites manipulate electoral laws, creating obstacles for opposition candidates and restricting freedom of speech. By engaging in clientelism and patronage, they exchange benefits for political support, further undermining electoral integrity.

*Role of Media and Democracy*

Free and impartial media are crucial for democracy, promoting political awareness and public engagement. In Pakistan, however, the media often serves elite interests, complicating its role in fostering democracy and accountability. Large media conglomerates and influential journalists shape public opinion and political narratives, controlling the agenda on key issues.

Commercial interests and advertising revenue often overshadow journalistic integrity, limiting diverse viewpoints and hindering investigative reporting. While essential for free expression and holding authorities accountable, media elites can misuse their influence to silence dissent and target critics. This stifling of free speech undermines democracy and threatens the rights of journalists and citizens.

### *Education*

Democracy is not inherent; it requires cultivation through education for active citizen participation. Benjamin Barber highlights that democracy is a rare construct achieved through imagination, not a natural trait. Individuals must learn and instill democratic values (Bibi, Jameel, & Jalal, 2018).

In Pakistan, elite influence significantly challenges the education sector. Elite control resources, creating disparities between privileged private schools and underfunded public institutions. This results in a two-tier system where public schools struggle against the superior facilities and networking opportunities offered by elite private schools.

Muzafar Syed emphasizes that elites often evade accountability in the education sector, leading to corruption and mismanagement. Resources meant for education can be misallocated, denying students the essential quality education they need (Syed, 2024). Elites shape education policies to serve their interests, neglecting the broader population and hindering comprehensive reform. This focus results in underinvestment in public education and undermines the government's duty to ensure quality education for all, perpetuating disparities and restricting social mobility. Elite influence reinforces social exclusion by limiting upward opportunities and deepening socioeconomic inequalities. This dominance also restricts access to higher education for less privileged students, further entrenching social stratification and impeding economic development.

### *Role of the Judiciary*

The judiciary is vital for democracy, ensuring fair and timely justice for all citizens, regardless of their status. Effective judicial practices are essential for peace and economic development, preventing the exploitation of vulnerable populations and upholding the rule of law.

In Pakistan, the influence of elites, including politicians and powerful business figures, on judicial independence poses risks to accountability and governance. According to Khaliq Kiani, these elites often manipulate the judge appointment process to favor their interests, undermining merit-based selections and judicial independence (Kiani, 2024).

Elites exert pressure through personal connections and political or economic means, compromising judges' impartiality and integrity. This interference erodes public trust in the legal system, as elites may manipulate judicial processes, obstruct legal proceedings, or influence outcomes to protect their interests or target opponents. Such interference hinders the judiciary's ability to deliver justice fairly and independently.

### *Freedom of Speech*

Freedom of speech and expression is essential for democracy. A democratic government should not suppress diverse voices or opinions. In Pakistan, citizens are granted this fundamental right under Article 19 of the Constitution, which aligns with international norms found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, of which Pakistan is a signatory. However, there are restrictions on press freedom concerning defense, national security, and religion.

According to Saleem Safi, elite capture significantly impacts freedom of expression in Pakistan. The power structures and patronage networks maintained by the political and economic elite hinder individuals and media outlets from freely expressing their opinions and holding the elite accountable (Safi, 2024).

### *Accountability*

Corruption remains a significant issue in Pakistan, with public perception surveys highlighting key government departments involved, including land revenue, police, and judiciary. The taxation department, public sector banking, non-banking development institutions, power sector, and civil works also rank high. The informal economy, comprising 33.1% of the national economy, reveals numerous malpractices and corruption opportunities (Mahar, Malik, & Bakhtiar, 2023).

In an interview, Dr. Naurine Naser emphasized that elite capture significantly undermines accountability, fostering a culture of impunity among the ruling class. Elite politics in Pakistan is marked by entrenched power structures and patronage networks, allowing the political and economic elite to protect their interests from scrutiny. These elites often manipulate key state institutions like the bureaucracy, judiciary, and law enforcement agencies to evade accountability, which hinders these institutions' independence and effectiveness (Naser, 2024).

### *Unemployment*

Unemployment is a significant challenge for developing countries, with employment being a crucial factor in stimulating economic growth. Increased employment is vital for enhancing the living standards of impoverished populations. Pakistan, as a developing nation, faces numerous issues, including unemployment, poverty, inflation, malnutrition, and unequal wealth distribution. It has the 9th largest labor force globally, and when this labor force actively engages in economic activities, it boosts GDP growth and economic prosperity.

In Pakistan, 45% of the population aged 15-24 is unemployed, representing 62 million youth. The unemployment rate exceeds 50%, positioning Pakistan among the countries with the highest youth unemployment, according to the World Bank. The job market is weak, characterized by inadequate wages and job security. Dr. Munas Ahmar notes that elite capture, where wealth is concentrated in a few hands, restricts employment opportunities, favoring connections over merit and qualifications (Ahmar, 2024).

Elite capture has negatively impacted the economy, society, democracy, and governance of the country. It has increased inequality and created disparity among the masses. It has created a double standard in the country, i.e., the double standard of law, the double standard of education, the double standard of justice, the double standard of opportunities, the double standard of employment, the double standard of living, and even the double standard of life and death.

*Drug Addiction and Elite Capture*

Drug addiction is a critical issue in Pakistan, affecting families and communities across the nation. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime reports around 7.6 million drug addicts, predominantly 78% male and 22% female, with about 800,000 individuals, aged 15 to 64, using heroin regularly.

Globally, over 350 million people use drugs, leading to approximately 4 million deaths annually, according to the World Health Organization. In Pakistan, there are roughly 9 million illegal drug users, primarily aged 25 to 49.

Estimates from the American journal “Foreign Policy” indicate that drug-related issues cause around 250,000 deaths each year in Pakistan, outnumbering terrorism fatalities, which were over 60,000 in the past decade. With about 700 daily deaths from drug complications and overdoses, this situation is dire. Approximately 7 million people use drugs regularly, with 4 million consuming cannabis and 2.7 million using opiates (Ochani, Athar, Nazar, Rani, Ochani, & Zaman, 2023).

Journalist Ikram Hoti emphasizes that poverty breeds stress and hopelessness, prompting individuals to seek escape through drug use, which may lead to social unrest (Hoti, 2024). Poverty is closely linked to economic disparity, limiting access to crucial resources and opportunities, which increases inequality. It also strongly correlates with poor mental health outcomes due to factors like stress, limited healthcare access, inadequate housing, and social isolation. These challenges worsen mental health for the impoverished, making poverty a core issue often rooted in elite resource capture.

Journalist Lehaq Ali stated that this elite capture restricts youth opportunities, leading many to emigrate or turn to drug use (Ali L. , 2024).

*Brian Drain and Elite Capture*

Political instability has persistently plagued Pakistan since its independence, resulting in significant brain drain among skilled professionals, particularly in healthcare. From 1971 to 2022, around 6 million qualified individuals emigrated, with notable numbers being 50,110 healthcare professionals, including 31,418 doctors and 12,553 nurses. Key factors for this exodus include an unstable political climate,

poor healthcare infrastructure, limited job prospects, and low salaries (Meo & Sultan, 2023).

Migrants have relocated to various countries such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, the USA, and the UK, with demographics indicating 9.99% from Islamabad and 8.01% from Lahore (Meo & Sultan, 2023). In 2022, approximately 800,000 Pakistanis sought overseas employment, though many use student visas or illegal means, with 67% of young Pakistanis expressing a desire to leave (Chaudhry, 2023). Each year, 30,000 to 40,000 attempt illegal entry into Europe and the Middle East, facing perilous journeys, exploitation, and often tragic outcomes, including boat sinking (Ahmed, 2023).

Khaliq Kiani argues that elite capture in Pakistan concentrates resources and decision-making power among a privileged few, limiting social and economic progress for the broader population. This situation leads skilled individuals to seek opportunities abroad, believing they can realize their potential elsewhere (Kiani, 2024).

Kiani highlights that such capture results in underinvestment in essential sectors like education, research, and innovation. When resources benefit only the elite, critical areas for developing a skilled workforce suffer, pushing talent abroad. The lack of recognition, professional advancement, and supportive environments accelerates this trend (Kiani, 2024).

Dr. Mushtaq, in an interview, stated that elite capture intensifies economic disparities by restricting marginalized communities' access to education, employment, and social welfare. This unequal distribution of opportunity drives some individuals, especially from disadvantaged backgrounds, to consider illegal migration to Europe for better prospects (Ahmad D. M., 2024).

He linked elite capture to resource mismanagement, corruption, and governance transparency issues, resulting in inefficiencies in public services and infrastructure. Misallocation of funds that should support healthcare, education, and social welfare further marginalizes vulnerable populations, propelling them towards illegal migration as a means to escape poverty and insecurity (Ahmad D. M., 2024).

*No Merit*



Meritocracy means rewarding individuals based on talent and effort rather than inherited privilege. Success should theoretically come from intelligence and hard work, irrespective of socio-economic background (Kamran, 2024).

In Pakistan, however, meritocracy is often undermined by favoritism, corruption, and nepotism. Positions of influence are frequently filled based on political or familial connections rather than qualifications (Ulfat, 2024).

Dr. Ikramullah argues that true merit is lacking in Pakistan; positions of power are attained through non-meritocratic means. Despite potential government reforms to promote merit, a double standard exists in education, health, and necessities. In a society where proficiency in English often dictates a person's educational credibility, students from ordinary public institutions struggle to compete with those educated privately or abroad (Ikramullah, 2024).

### **Conclusion**

Elite capture is the process by which powerful elites use the resources of poor people and shape policies to protect their interests. It is a situation where elites design the process of development according to their own needs or use the resources of development for their gain. Elite capture of the monopoly of the haves over the resources of the have-nots.

In Pakistan, on one hand, there is a group of elites who live a luxurious life, whose children are born with a golden spoon and have neither guessed the cold nor the heat. They send their children to study in the top-class universities abroad. In this way, they are made to rule over the poor, unemployed, and backward classes. If they want to study inside the country, there are special elite-class institutions for them.

On the other hand, in the downtrodden class of Pakistani society, most of the newborn babies fall prey to disabilities and diseases. They study in educational institutions with weak infrastructure and almost no facilities. With such a low standard of education, they cannot even think to compete with the elite class. There are many difficulties in the life of this class of people. They have been scaffolded by so many difficulties that they are forced to think about why they were born. If they get sick, there is no medicine for their treatment. If they are hungry, there is no food for them. If it rains, there is no roof for them. If there is a flood, there is no home for them. And then the death of such a class of people also happens

very quietly. No one takes responsibility for their forced life in this country. The youth of this class mostly fall prey to drugs or leave the country legally or illegally for a better future.

### **Recommendations**

- Education with a single national curriculum and similar facilities should be provided without any discrimination to all citizens to enable all people to compete with each other. In the prevailing system, the child of an ordinary citizen who has studied in a public sector educational institution is unable to compete with the children of elites who have studied in an elitist institution of the country or abroad.
- People should be made aware by teachers, and through social media, about the implications of elite capture. Mass education and political consciousness are the most powerful tools of social change and political development. It is rightly stated that vigilance is the price of liberty. Awareness through education and social media would bring constructive changes in reducing the influence of elitism in Pakistan.
- The perks and privileges of bureaucracy should be abolished. Reforms in the civil services are mandatory. Being economically weak, Pakistan cannot afford the perks and privileges given to elite groups. Tax evasion, subsidies, and grants should not be given to any elite group. The amnesty scheme should be abolished.
- Transparency should be enhanced in government operations, budget allocation, and the process of resource management.
- Land reforms and limits for wealth would be the most important steps towards discouraging elite capture.
- Non-developmental expenditure should be reduced. There should be a drastic cut back on the defense budget.

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