

When Gold Rust what shall Iron do?

Outline:

(i) Thesis Statement:

"The moral and political decay of the elite in a society culminates into the collapse of the entire society"

(ii) What do the metaphors of "Gold" & "Iron" signify?

(1) "Gold" represents people or nation who are in position of authority and have significant influence over ordinary citizens and nations, such as;

- Political Elite
- Religious Elite
- Global Elite

(2) "Iron" epitomizes ordinary people and nation who are influenced by the actions of the aforementioned department of elite or power elite.

1) Why the fate of society tied to the actions of its elite?

- The elite acts as a role model who are emulated by the masses.
- Due to elite capture of most states in the world, the elite control, important institutions, resources and have significant decision-making power.

• An incompetent or complacent elite fails to keep the house in order and keep society in check.

v) How did the nobility causes the fall of great empire?

- The incompetence of warring heirs of Aurangzeb caused the downfall of the Mughal Empire.

v) How has religious elite been complacent in spending extremism?

- The menace of extremism has thrived, both globally and in Pakistan, on the complacency of ultra-orthodox religious clerics who had widespread influence over ordinary individuals.

vi) Why corruption and nepotism become so entrenched in developing world?

The patronage networks instituted by the elites to siphon off public money trickle the corruption down to every level of society.

vii) Why is international law so flagrantly violated even in 21st century?

When the protectors of international law - such as the U.S, U.K - themselves violate the international norms through illegal interventions, it gives an impetus to lesser-powerful countries like India & Israel to become hegemonic as well.

• How can the elite like wise lead a nation towards success?

If the power-that-be are competent, dedicated and righteous, they can inspire the nations and develop productive institutions which can lead a country towards prosperity.

Recommendations:

What should the world learn from this adage?

The influential^{nobility}, both national and international, should consider the consequences of their actions and unconditionally strive to follow and establish rule of law.

Conclusion.

"Societies collapse when there is a conflict between the short-term interests of those in power, and the long-term interests of the society as a whole."

Jared Diamond,
Collapse:
"How Societies Chose
to Fail or Succeed"

Jared Diamond has aptly described that single biggest cause of fall of human civilization throughout the history of mankind. The quote explains how the elite fraction of the society set the course of society's downfall with their personal moral degeneration, incompetence and corruption. But why is leadership so essential for a society? How has ruling elite been instrumental in the rise & fall of empires? How can current human predicament be analyzed from this prism? Like Diamond.

Geoffrey Chaucer answers these fundamental questions with the adage that: "If gold rusts, what shall the iron do?" It is a perceptible fact that the political, religious and international elite have a significant sway over their spheres of influence. Due to their immense influence and authority, their actions and decisions direct influence national outcomes. This fact is observable in the rise and fall of historic empires as well as contemporary challenges confronting mankind. Based on

This evidence, it can be claimed, that the moral and political decay of the elite in a society eventually culminates into the collapse of the entire society.

The topic has alluded to the ideas discussed above by using the term "Gold" and "Iron" as metaphors. Gold is precious metal that ordinary doesn't rust. It is also one of the most important metal. Moreover, it is available in lesser quantity compared to other metals. This is why Chaucer analogizes elite to gold since they are in lesser numbers. They also have great resources and constitute an important portion in the social structure. This includes all kinds of elites: political, religious and global. Contrarily, Iron is a common metal that rusts easily. Hence, the ordinary people are compared with iron as they are in greater numbers and don't have privileges that elites enjoy in terms of access to resources and authority. Thus, the adage poses a rhetorical question that when a precious metal, which ordinarily doesn't get rusted, do in fact rust. Then this is inevitable that ordinary metals, which are prone to rusting, will do as well. The thought that can, thus, be derived from this expression is that when the elite segments of society fall from grace, then the ordinary people follow suit as well. Subsequently, the entire social system falters due to the things set in motion by those at the top.

As pointed out earlier, there are a number of ways in which the actions of elites influence societal outcomes. Importantly, they

significant following among the masses. Be they political or religious leaders, they tend to have significant authority over their respective spheres of influence. This influence may come from a formal position of power or personal charm. They may hold important positions in key institutions of the country or may come to dominate the hearts and minds of the masses due to their magnanimity. Max Weber has considered both these forms as legitimate forms of authority that has existed for centuries. Consequently, people tend to believe and follow the footsteps of their leaders. They emulate the behavior and follow the direction of their leaders. Thus, if such leaders demonstrate good moral character, it will trickle down to the masses as well. On the other hand, if the same power-elite turns vile, their followers will tread the same path as well. In this case, the whole society will plunge into darkness due to the actions of the ruling-elite.

The previous section has discussed how the elite affects the society indirectly through their followers. Additionally, the powers-elite can directly influence societal success or failure as well. Most countries in the world suffer from a phenomenon called **elite capture** by the political theorists. This entails that an overwhelming majority of resources, authority and decision making power is concentrated in the hands of a powerful few. Thus when these few err due to criminal omission or deliberate commission, the whole society perishes. For instance, six financial institutions in the U.S have assets that are Bank of America (BOA), J.P. Morgan, Citigroup, Wells Fargo, Goldman Sachs, and Morgan Stanley. Hence, when the Big Bank

defaulted due to their risky investments in 2008 Housing Bubble, the whole economy of the U.S., and subsequently that of the world, came crashing down. This is a further proof of how deeply the fate of a society is connected with the actions of its elite.

Another line of reasoning in this regard highlights the regulatory power of the ruling-elite. The ruling elite is responsible for keeping the excesses of the society in check. They occupy the major positions in legislature, **bureaucracy**, **Judiciary** and the **military**. They formulate key economic and financial policies. They maintain the accountability institutions. They are responsible for keeping the financial corruption in check. They have to make sure that no one abuses the authority to evade the law. All in all, they are tasked with enforcing rule of law in letter and spirit. Hence, the quality of their leadership and competency become more important. If those in positions of authority do their jobs well, the society progresses. On the other hand, failure to do their duty will directly impact the quality of the institutions of governance. There is a positive correlation b/w quality of institutions and economic growth as noticed by **Daron Acemoglu** and **James Robinson** in their magnum opus, **Why nations fail**. This evidence further highlights the role elite plays in making or breaking of a nation.

Having established a causal link between societal success and the actions of the leadership

of a country, it would be useful to investigate this further by using historical evidence. In this regard, the fall of Mughal Empire has reached its zenith during the reign of Aurangzeb Alamgir. Upon his death, the empire was engaged in bloody wars of succession. Bahadur Shah I killed Azam Shah in the Battle of Jajmur. Later, Bahadur Shah's army also killed his half-brother, Muhammad Khan Baksh. Not only was there infighting within the royal house but the regional elite started looking out for their petty interest as well. This manifested in the form of Rajput rebellion in Amber, Udaipur and Jodhpur, and the Sikh rebellion. The squabbling elites weakened the empire and stretched its resources, making it vulnerable to external threats. This is why when British East India Company arrived, it had encountered a much weaker empire that was relatively easy to conquer. Even then, the British capitalized upon the internal fault lines to conquer the subcontinent, proving that the downfall of great empires is also attributable to the actions of their despicable ruling elite.

While history attests the thesis under discussion, the contemporary challenges confronting mankind also demonstrate the same point. This is observable particularly in the issue of extremism. Most people rely on religious leaders and scholars in matters of faith. Too often, people often follow their religious clerics blindly and don't concern themselves with an independent inquiry into the religious thoughts. This blind following on part of masses gives many religious clerics unbridled power. As a result, if these torch bearers of faith err in their judgement or misinterpret the scripture, the result can be catastrophic. This is evident from the fact that terrorism and fundamentalism has thrived due to misinterpretation of religious

leaders for their political ends. The followers of Abu Bakur, St. Bayezid, Osama Bin Laden, and Ehsanullah Elssan have blindly followed the way of their leaders instead of objectively analyzing the message of religion. Thus, even in matters of faith the leaders play a monumental role in guiding or misguiding their followers of a message of religion, the society at large. The religious enthusiasm, as discussed above, is representative of moral corruption. Likewise, financial corruption is also perpetuated in a society by the powerful groups whenever the elite tries to evade law and order money illegally in a society, they do so by creating a systematic network. It is often achieved by creating patronage networks and introducing rent seeking practices in the economy. They evade the tax by misdeclaring their assets. Another wrong business practice, that they indulge in is creating monopolies and oligopolies. For instance, the one party state of Mexico, the PRI, privatized a telecommunication monopoly to Carlos Slim in 1990's, who evaded the anti-trust law making him one of the richest men in the world. This reduced the national income by about 2% a year in Mexico. This is one story of developing countries everywhere, some of the reasons why their national income falls significantly behind that of the developed world are massive amounts of tax evasion, financial embezzlements and presence of oligarchic monopolies. Yet again, the economic woes of these countries are inescapable to the actions of their political & social elite.

Just the way domestic elite is responsible for managing domestic affairs, the world powers are responsible for doing the same domestic affairs, the world powers are responsible for doing the same on the global scale. This is visibly manifest in this form of the power politics at UN, particularly the security council. Historically, the U.N has flagrantly violated the international law, through illegal means in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. It has violated global

norms more than subtly as well in the form of proxy warfare in Vietnam, Korea and Syria. It has also been biased towards its own vested interests. The economic, political and military partnership with Israel and India fuels the military-industrial complex of the U.S. Case in point being 35 billion dollars arms deal with India & moving the Embassy to Jerusalem. Subsequently when countries like Israel and India get bellicose and belligerent, the world leader neither have the moral authority nor political will to stop them. Hence, the global elite become responsible for creating a culture of realpolitik as opposed to a rule-based international order. Thus, the way domestic elite is responsible for domestic outcomes & global elite is responsible for global outcomes.

So far the discussion has been around has been around how the failure of leadership leads to the failure of society. Alternatively, if the leaders, in good conscience, take right decisions, the society can immensely prosper as well. In this scenario, when leaders use their authority and influence positively, they end up introducing good institutions in the country. Good institutions, subsequently, leads to good governance and administration. Moreover, their positive influence inspire trust from the masses and the instances of malpractices are part of citizens decrease as well. This helps in creating both a strong modern state as well as a republican nation. Hence, successful nation-states can only come about from a good ruling elite. Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson has discussed this at great length in "Why Nations Fail". Their evidence point out that ^{not} only the successful western democracies are the product of good decisions made by their leaders but the rise of Asian Tigers like Singapore & Malaysia is also

attributable to the sincere statementship of their leaders, the likes of Lee Kuan Teo and Mahatma Muhammad. Hence, it can be conclusively claimed that for a nation to become successful, its leaders need to act judiciously as well as make the right decision.

Having established the importance, political, religious and global elite in shaping the future of societies, this section argues that these lessons should be followed in practice as well. Domestically, the political elite must understand the consequences of their actions. Thus, they should take the right decisions in the larger interest of Pakistan society rather than serving their own petty interests. Likewise, the religious elite needs to stop misinterpreting the religion for political ends. Rather, they should spread the message of peace, harmony and co-existence, which is the essence of religion.

Additionally, the global powers need to walk the talk. Instead of just giving hollow speeches on the floor of UN General Assembly, they need to do what is right for the world and not what is right for them alone. If these cardinal principles are observed by the upper echelons alone. If these cardinal principles are observed by the upper echelons of Pakistani society & all other societies, there can be tremendous improvement in standard of living of people across the globe. This will also lead to a safer and more peaceful world, both at home and abroad. Hence, real progress and societal evolution hinges upon how the elite takes these historical lessons.

In conclusion this essay has focused on three forms of leadership - political, religious, global - and examined their role in carving the fate of a society. The common thread that emerges from this discussion is that those who are in positions of authority wield significant influence and power over

ordinary citizens. They also control the key institutions and organizations. This is why their selfish greed or poor decision-making lands the entire societies in hot waters. This has been proven time and again by the force of history. From the fall of Roman Empire to that of Mughal Empire, history asserts the poor leadership at top can crumble any great power. The biggest challenges that confront Pakistan and the developing world - terrorism, corruption and poor governance - are also attributable to the failure of ruling elite. In the same light, global powers have shielded away from their duty & responsibility to follow, enforce and maintain international laws. It is the responsibility of all these stakeholders of powers to do their duty sincerely, as this has been proven to be the only path towards development. For too long, ordinary citizens have borne the cost of failure of their rulers. It is hard time to guard guardians.

